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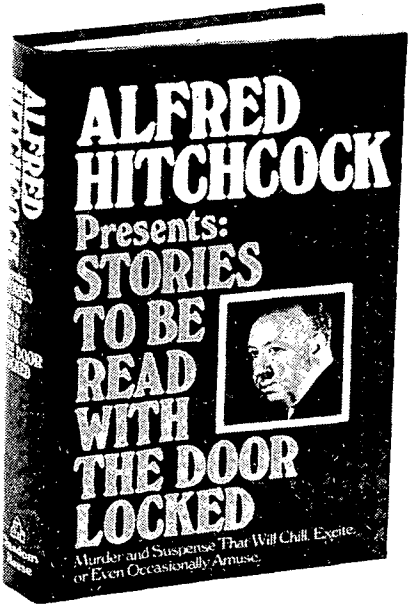
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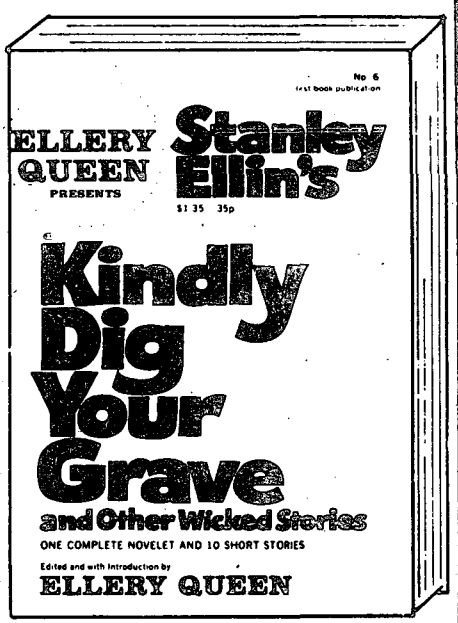

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THE THEFT OF THE ADMIRAL'S SNOW

by EDWARD D. HOCH

In the months since Gloria had decided that Nick Velvet was in reality an agent of the U.S. government, engaged in some nebulous sort of undercover business, his frequent travels had become somewhat easier to arrange. She never questioned him any more and even helped to pack his bag.

"You'll need warm clothing for Canada, Nicky," she decided, slipping a bulky cable-stitched sweater into his suitcase.

"That takes up half the bag," Nick complained.

"But it'll keep you warm. Up there March is still winter."

"It's still winter down here too," he decided, glancing out at the snow-covered evergreens in the front yard.

"How long will you be gone, Nicky?"

He shrugged. "A few days, a week at the most." He closed the bag and snapped shut the lock. As he kissed her goodbye he almost added, "As long as it takes me to steal the snow off the side of a mountain."

But he didn't say it, because Gloria would never have understood.

Paul Gaspar, the ruggedly handsome young man who'd summoned Nick to the foothills of the Laurentians north of Montreal,

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waved his hand at the hillside above them, with its bare stretches of earth showing through a thin spotty snow cover. "This is our problem, Velvet. Not enough snow."

Gaspar seemed a pleasant enough sort, and he had $20,000 he wanted to give Nick. That was enough to make him an instant friend. "You need the snow for your ski resort."

"Exactly. There's never been a winter like this, not in all my years here. The traditional heavy snows mostly passed us by. I have only three more weeks of the season left. If I lose those, I'll be wiped out."

"You have no snow-making equipment?"

"I've never needed it before, not up here. Believe me, next year I'll have it, if I'm still in business."

Nick gazed up at the snow-parched hillside. "You want me to steal enough snow to fill in all those bare spots? Where do I find it?"

"Admiral Lag's place. He's about two miles from here, with a mountainside facing north. He got the snow and he kept it. The sun didn't reach that side to melt it off."

"This is a bit out of my line," Nick murmured. "Admittedly the snow is valueless to this Admiral Lag, but it certainly has value to you."

"If I don't have snow I'll lose this whole place. That's worth your $20,000 fee."

"It is something of a challenge," Nick admitted.

"I got the idea from a newspaper article. Some ski resorts in Switzerland have been stealing snow from each other because of the poor winter over there. The ones with snow have to post guards at night. When I read that, and remembered hearing about Nick Velvet—a thief who steals valueless things—I got on the phone to you."

"But it would take a hundred truckloads of snow to fill in all those bare spots and give you a base for skiing."

"Closer to two hundred," Paul Gaspar corrected. "But there's a ridge up on top, with a service road running along it. You get the snow up there and dump it. I can push it the rest of the way with my bulldozer."

"It has to be Admiral Lag's snow?"

"That's the only place nearby where there's enough."

"Look," Nick suggested, "since the snow is valuable to you but worthless to the admiral, why don't you simply go down there and

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ask him for it? Buy it if you need to. I'm sure he'd charge you less than twenty grand."

Gaspar shook his head. "You don't know Admiral Lag. You'll earn your money getting that snow away from him."

"Crusty old fellow?"

"Not crusty exactly, no. But before retirement most of his naval career was spent in the Middle East and Far East. He has a large collection of mummified heads and they say he talks to them."

Nick snorted. "You're too sensible to buy nonsense like that. What's the real reason you're staying away from him?"

Paul Gaspar smiled. "I see you're an instant judge of character along with your other skills. As it happens, I'm friendly with the admiral's daughter."

"I should have known. And I'm to deliver her from the ogre's lair along with the snow?"

"No," he answered, his smile widening a bit. "You get the snow, Velvet. I'll get the daughter."

Nick Velvet spent the first afternoon scouting the admiral's house and the surrounding countryside. It was a three-story house done in the style of a Swiss chalet, and he wondered what the inside would look like.

Opposite the house was a long stretch of yard running some two hundred feet to the main highway. In the very center of the yard, but closer to the house than to the road, was some sort of long, narrow naval gun, apparently from a ship. A number of small navy flags flew from a mast next to it. He gathered from the flags that Lag had served in the British navy, perhaps during wartime.

Across the highway, directly opposite the house, was the north side of a small mountain—completely covered with snow as Gaspar had promised. Nick studied it for some time, then decided on a trip to Montreal. He did not return until the following afternoon, but he had what he'd gone for.

He left his car and was standing on the almost bare front lawn, studying the naval gun on its turret mounting, when a woman of perhaps 35 approached him. She was wearing a tennis costume that showed off her good figure. "Can I be of help?" She spoke a British brand of English that seemed to Nick's ear to be shaded with a subtle French accent.

"Just taking in the view," Nick said. "That's the most snow I've seen all day."

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She smiled sweetly. "It's been a mild winter. But I must remind you this is private property."

"Oh? That's quite a house you've got."

"My father built it."

Nick glanced down at her bare legs. "Isn't it still a bit cool for tennis?"

"The court is enclosed, but may I remind you again, this is private property."

A bulky man in sweater and tennis shorts appeared behind her, swinging a racket loosely in a hand that was as hairy as his legs. "This fellow bothering you, Marsha?"

"Not really," she answered over her shoulder, keeping her eyes on Nick. "He was just admiring the snow."

"Actually it was a bit more than that," Nick admitted. "I have something of a business proposition to present, and I wonder if I might see your father."

Marsha Lag and her tennis partner exchanged glances. "Father doesn't receive visitors," she answered coolly.

"Could you give him a message for me?"

"What sort of message?" the hairy man asked.

"Tell him I want to talk about the head of a Chinese."

The color drained from Marsha Lag's face. "Tell him," she instructed the man, and he trotted back toward the house without a word.

"Is he a servant?" Nick asked.

"Harry Pine—my father's secretary-companion. And mine too, on the tennis court. Now what's all this about a Chinese head?"

"It's a relic of sorts. I was told by a dealer in Montreal that Admiral Lag might be interested."

Apparently she decided not to wait for her father's response. "Follow me," she said, and led the way around the side of the house.

They entered the enclosed tennis court area, where a couple of balls rested near the net, giving evidence of recent play. She led him across the court and into the house by a connecting door. After the exotic outside the interior was something of a letdown. There were jade statues and oriental souvenirs by the carload, but all were arranged in the haphazard fashion of a curio shop's bargain basement, without any taste or sense of value.

"My father collected a good deal of bric-a-brac during his years at sea," Marsha Lag explained.

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"He certainly did."

"But one thing he doesn't need is the head of a Chinese!" She dropped her voice as she spoke, as if in fear that her father would overhear.

And he almost did. A door opened and a stout old man wearing the jacket of a naval officer's uniform entered the room. Harry Pine, still in his tennis shorts but without the racket, followed close behind.

"Well, well—I am Admiral Lag. Did you wish to see me, sir?"

"Nick Velvet." He held out his hand and received the Admiral's icy grip. "A pleasure to meet you."

"You know the others—my daughter Marsha, my companion Mr. Pine."

"We've met."

Admiral Lag lowered his stout body into a faded green armchair that was his obvious favorite. Harry Pine placed a stool under his feet, and the old man said, "Now tell me, sir, about this head of a Chinese."

Taking in the distressed expressions on the faces of Pine and Marsha, Nick nevertheless plunged ahead. "I acquired it in the Orient some years back — the mummified head of a Chinese wise man who was decapitated during the Boxer Rebellion. I was told it still sometimes talks, acting as a sort of oracle, but of course I don't believe any of that."

Admiral Lag shifted in his chair. "Do not dismiss it out of hand, sir. Many tales from antiquity have told of speaking heads. The Oracle at Lesbos was a speaking head. And the head of the physician Dalban, according to legend, lived on long after death. The art of constructing speaking heads or androides was handed down through the Middle Ages. Just before the French Revolution a man named Mical presented a collection of speaking heads to the French Academy of Sciences."

"Mechanical devices," Nick objected.

"Certainly the androides were. But theraphims were the embalmed heads of the dead. That is what you say you possess?"

"Yes."

"I would want to see it. Do you have it with you?"

"What can you show me in return?" Nick asked, playing for time.

"Need I show you anything?"

"Come now, Admiral. You know as well as I do that the decapi-

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tation mystery and the talking head were standard magicians' tricks as far back as the biblical pantomimes presented by strolling players in the Thirteenth Century. Every troupe had their John the Baptist act to perform."

"You are a knowledgeable man, sir."

Nick had done his homework and had always had a good memory for odd facts. "I'd like to see your heads before I commit myself further," he said. "After all, I have only the word of a dealer in Montreal."

The admiral lifted himself from the chair. "Very well, sir, you shall see them."

As Nick followed him into the hall he said, "I was admiring the naval gun out front. Does it really fire?"

"Certainly. That's a three-inch dual-purpose gun off a destroyer. Used for surface or anti-aircraft. I have shells for it right in this closet."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not to me. The gun can't be turned to fire at the house. All it could hit would be the top of the mountain across the highway. I tried it one night a couple of summers ago and promptly brought the provincial police down on me. But hell, it's my own property over there! They just fined me for disturbing the peace."

"Is that so?" Nick murmured.

"But you want to see the heads, sir. This way."

They were interrupted with disconcerting suddenness by a short girl in jeans and a plaid shirt, who dashed down the stairs toward the front door. "Marilyn!" Marsha Lag shouted. "Can't you see we have company?"

Marilyn paused and brushed the hair from her eyes. Nick guessed her to be about 18, the kid sister who was having trouble growing up. "I'm Marilyn," she announced, sticking out her hand at him.

"I'm Nick. Pleased to meet you."

"Where are you going?" Marsha demanded.

"Ah, sis! Just out for a while. It's such a nice day."

"All right, but don't go far. Be sure you're back for dinner."

Nick watched the teen-aged girl go out the front door. "You must be the mother around here," he said to Marsha.

"I have to be."

Admiral Lag grunted. "Marilyn came late in life — too late in life for my wife. She died when Marilyn was born."

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"And that," Marsha observed pointedly, "was when father took up with his talking heads."

The admiral led the way upstairs, moving with surprising dexterity. When they finally reached a locked third-floor room he paused before the door like some wizard about to share the secret of the universe.

"Behold," he announced, opening the door, "my speaking heads!"

The small room was lined with shelves on three sides, and on them rested perhaps a hundred mummified heads of all sizes and shapes. Some were the familiar shrunken heads of the Amazon jungles. Others were life-size, with leathery skin that indicated great age. As near as Nick could tell, the features of many seemed oriental or Arabic. Most of them were male, though a few seemed feminine.

"Some come from the jungles, as you can see," the admiral explained. "But most were obtained during my tours of duty in the Near East and Far East. Beheading is still the favored method of execution in Arab lands." He paused before one head with a lighter skin than the rest. "This one was a product of the French guillotine."

"Fascinating," Nick said solemnly.

"I think it's disgusting," Marsha Lag said from the doorway. "And they don't talk at all, except in my father's imagination."

The admiral ignored her and asked Nick, "Well then, where is your head, sir?"

"In my car. I'll get it."

Nick went downstairs and out the front door, feeling the bright afternoon sun on his face. There was no sign of young Marilyn, and he wondered if she had a car of her own.

From the trunk of his rented vehicle Nick removed a leather hatbox like the one carried by the murderer in Emlyn Williams' play *Night Must Fall*. It had always seemed to Nick the perfect method for transporting heads. Nick had driven into Montreal to obtain it, along with its contents.

Harry Pine was waiting at the door when he returned. "The old man doesn't need this," he said. "We've had him pretty much under control lately and now you come along."

"I don't think I understand," Nick replied with a smile. "I'm only here to see him about this head."

Admiral Lag had descended to the main-floor sitting room, and while his daughter poured afternoon tea the admiral watched rev-

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erently as Nick opened the hatbox and took out the head of a Chinese, complete with the pigtail that dated it from another era. The admiral squinted at it, then put on eyeglasses to study it more carefully. But when he reached out to touch it, Nick pulled the head back. "No, no! Sorry, but it could be damaged."

"Is it a true oracle?" Admiral Lag breathed. "Does it speak?"

Nick hesitated. "It has talked to me, but always in more temperate climates. Obviously the person lived in the south of China, where snow was never seen."

"Snow?" The old admiral didn't seem to understand.

"The view out your window is of a snow-covered mountainside. I doubt if my head would talk until the snow has melted."

"That could be another month! The sun never hits there!"

Nick shrugged sadly. "I could come back then."

But Admiral Lag would have none of it. "No, I must have this head for my collection, whether it speaks or not. Will you sell it?"

"I could do that only if the head itself granted permission."

"And the head will not speak until spring?"

"I fear not." Nick managed to look downcast as he spoke the words.

"Let me think," the admiral said. "Stay with us, join us for dinner, and I will give it some thought."

Nick glanced up at Harry Pine and Marsha, read the look of distress—or fear?—that passed between them, and decided to accept. Whatever was going on in this house, it just might be more interesting than the snow outside.

Nick had noticed a telephone out at the tennis court and he decided to risk a call to Paul Gaspar. It could be an extension, and someone might listen in, but he figured they were all too busy with their own schemes.

"Paul? This is Nick Velvet."

"Where are you?"

"At the house. Everything's fine."

"When will you make delivery?"

"Soon. I've met the daughter. I can understand your interest."

"Velvet, I—"

"Gotta go," Nick said quickly as he heard the door to the house open. He hung up the phone and turned to see Harry Pine strolling across the tennis court toward him.

"I've been looking for you, Velvet."

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Nick smiled. "I'm right here."

Pine's hand came out of his pocket. He held a snub-nosed revolver pointed at Nick's stomach. "But we don't want you here. Not any more. We want you to pack up your head and get in your car and just start driving. Understand?"

"No, not really."

Pine sighed and raised the gun an inch. "You're a con man of some sort, Velvet, here to swindle the old man. We're not standing still for that."

"I can assure you—"

But Harry Pine waited no longer. He cupped the weapon in his fist and swung at Nick's head. In a moment they both went down, rolling over on the tennis court. Nick felt helpless against the younger man's attack, and he realized quickly how out of condition he was. In an instant Pine was on top, pinning Nick's shoulders, raising the gun for a blow at Nick's unprotected head.

"What's going on here?" a voice asked from the outer door. "Can I get in on it too?"

It was Marilyn Lag, still wearing her jeans and shirt, but looking in that instant very much as if she could handle Harry Pine. He paused, face flushed at the sight of her, and lowered his weapon. "This isn't your business, kid."

"I'm no kid, and get off him!" As if to reinforce her words, she scooped up a tennis racket from a bench by the side of the court and came at him.

He stood up quickly and pocketed the gun. "All right, calm down."

Nick got up more slowly, brushing off his clothes. He watched while Pine reentered the house, then said, "This is the first time I ever had to thank an eighteen-year-old girl for rescuing me."

"I'm seventeen," she corrected. "But I can take care of myself. You have to around here." She hefted the tennis racket. "Besides, Paul asked me to keep an eye on you."

"Paul?" Nick's mouth dropped open. "Paul Gaspar?"

"Sure. I go skiing over at his place. When he has snow, that is."

"But when he mentioned the admiral's daughter I thought—"

"You thought he meant Marsha? That's funny! She wouldn't be caught dead on skis. Or with Paul Gaspar, for that matter."

"So what's the big thing with Harry Pine? Why does he carry a gun? What are he and Marsha up to?"

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"No good—you can be sure of that! My father is a prisoner in this house. I can't remember when they've ever let him go out. Not in years, anyway. I was away at school, but now that I'm back it's worse than ever."

"Usually it's the other way around. The ogre isn't the prisoner."

"He's just a harmless old man with his sea stories and his collection of heads."

"Do you know why Gaspar hired me?"

"He said something about the snow."

"That's right. I'm not trying to con your father out of anything of value."

"Then why are my sister and Harry afraid of you?"

"I don't really know."

They went back into the house together and encountered Admiral Lag in the front hall. "You, sir! Enough of this time wasting! What must I do to obtain the head of the Chinese?"

Nick looked out the window at the snow. "That has to go, as I told you."

"How, sir? A mountain of snow does not simply vanish."

"Perhaps it could," Nick said. "Should I tell you how?"

The old man nodded, fingering the gold braid on his uniform jacket. In that moment Nick almost felt sorry for him.

"The gun," he said. "The three-inch naval gun in your front yard. Fire a shell at the top of that mountain, the way you did a couple of summers ago, and you'll bring down all that snow. What little is left on the mountainside will quickly melt at this temperature."

"A snowslide?" the Admiral asked doubtfully.

"It's the only way."

He glanced uncertainly at the closet where the shells were stored. "I don't know. The provincial police wouldn't like it. They'd fine me again."

"But you'd have the head," Nick assured him, "for your collection."

Marilyn nodded agreement and Admiral Lag told her, "Dear, run upstairs and bring me the key to this closet, will you? It's in my top bureau drawer."

But while he was trying to open the door a few moments later Marsha Lag appeared. "What is all this? What are you doing, Father?"

"We're going to get rid of the snow, so I can have the head."

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She turned her stormy eyes on Nick. "Haven't you been warned?"

"There's nothing to fear. I'll take full responsibility if the police come."

The old admiral passed out a slim artillery shell wrapped in heavy oilpaper. "I have only a couple left," he said.

"One should do the job."

"I forbid this!" Marsha shouted.

But Nick took the shell and was quickly out the door. He guessed that the admiral kept the three-inch gun in good working order and he was right. He opened the breech and inserted the shell, taking a visual sighting on the mountain across the highway.

Behind him he heard Marilyn scream a warning, and he turned just in time to avoid a blow from Harry Pine's pistol butt. He shoved the big man back and yanked the firing lanyard. The big gun went off with a roar that echoed against the mountain opposite.

Nick saw the shell hit and explode near the top of the ridge, and for a moment there was only a cloud of snow thrown up by the blast. Then it seemed the whole mountain began to move at once. The snowslide, once started, gained momentum as it rushed downhill, snapping small trees off at their trunks, hurling everything before it.

"My God!" Marsha screamed. "It's sweeping onto the highway!"

It was true. The onrushing snowslide hit the bottom with such force that it was propelled onward, across the level ground and onto the highway. Huge balls of snow actually rolled onto the lawn of the admiral's house, not a hundred feet away, before finally losing their momentum.

"We might have been killed," Harry Pine growled. "You damn fool, Velvet!"

"And now the highway's blocked!" Marsha said.

Even Admiral Lag was unhappy. "The snow didn't go away at all. It only came closer. Now the head will never speak."

But Nick Velvet merely smiled. He'd taken a long gamble and he'd won. The snow had come to rest exactly where he wanted it. Now all he had to do was move it.

Toward evening, when the sun had already dipped beneath the foothills to the west, the first of the provincial plows and trucks arrived. A police car was in the lead, and the officer spoke

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brusquely to Nick. "Whole highway's blocked here. The crews will be working half the night. What caused it?"

Nick shrugged innocently. "Spring thawing, I suppose. Looks like an early spring this year."

"Admiral Lag around?" the officer asked, peering up at the house.

"He's indisposed."

"Old coot's got a screw loose, you know. Likes to fire off his damn cannon every so often."

"Is that so?"

The officer's eyes narrowed. "He didn't fire it this evening, did he?"

"No," Nick replied. "I've been here all day. He didn't go near it."

When the officer had gone back to his car, Marilyn joined Nick. "That was slick. Now what?"

"Now we move the snow to Gaspar's ski resort."

"Really? But how?"

"You'll see."

It was almost dark now, and as Nick watched the bulldozer loading the first truck with snow he had no trouble luring the driver away. "Look what I've got here," he said.

"Huh? What is it?"

"A hundred dollars. Give me your jacket and cap and let me drive the truck for you."

"What for?"

"I'm an eccentric millionaire. I always wanted to drive a truck."

The man shrugged and accepted the money. "Okay by me."

"Where are you planning to dump the snow?"

"In the river, I suppose. That's what we usually do. Some of it we'll just push off the road and let it melt."

"Look, here's another hundred if you can get the rest of the drivers to follow along behind me and dump where I dump. And tell them to clear the snow from both sides of the road too, as far back as they can."

"We only got ten trucks. That'll take us forever."

Nick peeled off another hundred-dollar bill. "Split this among the other drivers. And tell them to follow me."

When the first truck was heaped high with snow, Nick took the wheel, driving a little way up the highway to wait until the second in line was loaded. Then he pulled out slowly, making sure he

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was followed, and started the two-mile drive to Paul Gaspar's barren hillside.

It was past midnight when Nick returned to Admiral Lag's house. Lights still burned on the first two floors, and Marilyn was waiting for him at the door. "You've done it!"

"Damn right I've done it. Twenty round trips. Two hundred truckloads of snow in all, but Gaspar will have skiing in the morning. With luck and some cooler weather it should last him through the month."

"You're a genius." She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Only a thief. But I enjoy rewards like that. Where's your sister?"

"In the front room. With Harry, of course. Father's gone to bed."

Nick strode into the room and went directly to the hatbox. "I just came to pick this up," he announced. Then, as he saw Pine's hand go to his pocket, he added, "No guns, please. Not this late at night. I've been driving a truck for four hours."

Marsha Lag stubbed out a cigarette and swung her long legs off the sofa. "That head is made of wax."

"Of course. Where would I find the real thing on such short notice? I rented this one from a wax museum in Montreal, but they want it back."

"What sort of swindler are you?"

"No sort. I have what I came after."

"We can call the police."

"Go ahead. I'll tell them you're holding your own father a prisoner in this house, with an armed guard to make sure he doesn't get away."

She rose to her feet then, confronting Nick. "You had to come back, didn't you? Had to find out about it!"

"Let's just say I'm curious."

Marsha glanced at her sister, standing in the doorway. "Go to bed, Marilyn."

"I'm old enough to hear."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"If I'm old enough to be going with Paul Gaspar, I'm old enough to hear!"

The color drained from Marsha's face, and Nick said, "She's right, you know."

"Is she?"

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"You can't be a mother to her forever."

Marsha glanced at Harry Pine for guidance. "Hell," he said, "tell them if you want to."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them wide and said, "Marilyn, our mother didn't die when you were born. She didn't die until you were two years old. She was murdered by our father."

"Murdered!"

"Now do you understand? And do you understand, Mr. Velvet? Was I to lose both parents at one time, one to death and the other to prison or an asylum? I chose to keep him here, to keep his secret these past fifteen years. Harry has helped me guard him—to protect him and to protect others from him."

"And the talking heads?" Nick asked, already knowing he didn't want to hear it, yet somehow needing to know.

And Marsha Lag answered, because it was a time for answering. "There's only one head in that room he ever hears talking to him. The rest are all there to hide it, like hiding a leaf in a forest or a pebble on a beach. It is the head of my mother—the woman he killed."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

THE $20,000 NICK KNACK

by MARK GRENIER

If you want something stolen with nary a hitch,
Call on Velvet to handle the snatch.
Till the caper's completed, his fingers will itch;
Then you'd better come up with the scratch.

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a *NEW* short story by

JANE SPEED

"A funny thing happened to Sarah Enright on her way home from work . . ."

A SHOCK OF RECOGNITION

by JANE SPEED

A funny thing happened to Sarah Enright on her way home from work.

Now, Miss Enright was a woman noted for her calm good sense. But this had been an altogether unsettling day, starting right off at 3:20 A.M. That was when her brother Eddie, whom she hadn't seen hide nor hair of since their mother's funeral last year, took it into his head to call from halfway across the country—collect, of course—to wish her a happy birthday.

"Thank you, Eddie," she'd replied with a civility remarkable for the hour, "but my birthday was last month," then hung up quickly before she said something they'd both be sorry for. *"Eddie's such a baby," Mama used to fret. "Thank goodness Sarah can take care of herself." Oh my, yes. Sarah, the steady; steady at school, steady at her job, nobody ever had to worry about Sarah. Only poor feckless Eddie, who was always in need . . . of money, of attention. And he'd got it all, though little good it seemed to have done him.* It was nearly 5:00 A.M. before the stirred-up residue of old bitterness settled enough to let Sarah drift back to sleep.

And she had no sooner arrived at work than she was faced with a succession of minor calamities. Even her precious lunch hour—a time of day Sarah particularly looked forward to—had to be sacrificed to the proliferating crises.

Small wonder then that by the time Sarah managed to get away from the office her nerves were uncharacteristically on edge. So much so that when she became aware of the footsteps behind

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her as she walked home from the bus stop, her first thought was, Oh, Lord, not *that* kind of trouble too.

Rubbish! The famous good sense quickly took charge. A person's walking a block or so in the same direction is no proof he's following you. This was a quiet, pleasant, *safe* neighborhood, largely inhabited by respectable single professionals like herself. Which was precisely why she'd moved into it after Mama died.

Besides, although it was fairly dark out it wasn't really late; plenty of people were still on the streets. She lifted her eyes to confirm this comforting fact, and by perverse chance there was at that moment not a soul to be seen on either side of the avenue. In spite of herself, Sarah quickened her pace a little.

Did she just imagine he quickened his? Resisting an absurd impulse to start running, she kept moving briskly but sedately toward her own building. She could see it just up ahead now and—thank goodness! —the outer door was propped open as it sometimes was on these warm nights. She reached it and swept without hindrance into the vestibule. Home free, she congratulated herself.

Then her heart gave a lurch of alarm. The footsteps, which had been coming steadily along, stopped dead on the sidewalk behind her. A sudden panicky vision of headline, WOMAN MUGGED IN ELEVATOR, loomed in Sarah's mind.

As she groped in her capacious purse for her keys, Sarah glanced through the glass doors of the lobby and was quite abjectly grateful to discover that she was not entirely alone.

There in the lobby with her dog was that nice Mrs. Something-or-other Sarah had spoken to once or twice. No real protection, of course; the woman was Sarah's age or older and the medium-sized dog hardly fearsome. But they were complicating factors, bless them. The mugger's choice, Sarah had read somewhere, was the isolated victim. Now, if she could just make sure *he* knew of their presence too . . .

What was that woman's name . . . Murphy? . . . Murray? . . . Sarah racked her brain as her trembling hand fitted the key into the lock . . . Murdoch! Purposefully, Sarah flung open the door and sang out, the more stridently for being so unaccustomed to raising her voice, "Hello there, Mrs. Murdoch!"

The overhearty greeting reverberated appallingly in the high-ceilinged lobby. The dog yipped at the sound and the startled Mrs. Murdoch turned her head from one side to the other as though

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seeking escape from this unprovoked attack of bonhomie.

And then—wouldn't you know? —just as the door swung slowly shut behind Sarah, the Cause of It All out there on the sidewalk sneezed and blew his nose, making ludicrously clear his innocent reason for having stopped.

The abrupt descent from high fear to low comedy left Sarah slightly giddy with a mixture of relief and chagrin. But the worst was yet to come. As she started across the lobby to make amends, she saw, to her utter mortification, that this was not Mrs. Murdoch at all, only someone who rather resembled her. Oh, dear, a perfect stranger! What must the woman think of her?

It was a question that really mattered to Sarah, for she valued above all else the good esteem of her peers. And if ever she'd seen a person cut from the same mold, it was the one now facing her. The very outfit the woman was wearing was something Sarah might have chosen for herself; her handsome purse was, in fact, almost a duplicate of Sarah's own. By rights, these two should have been exchanging confidences over a civilized pot of tea instead of eyeing each other in wary constraint.

"I do beg your pardon," said Sarah contritely. "I mistook you for someone else." Which more or less explained the *why* of it, but not that awful *how*. And Sarah winced at the recollection of her loud, brassy greeting. *I'm not that sort of person,* she protested in a silent wail. Aloud, she merely said, "I'm Sarah Enright," in the humble hope that a proper introduction, however belated, might in some measure restore her mannerly credentials.

"That's quite all right." The woman's pleasant voice bore out her well-bred appearance. "*Mrs.* Enright, is it?"

"*Miss* Enright," Sarah corrected her.

"Ah. . .then you live alone too?"

"Oh, yes." Sarah grasped eagerly at this common thread. "Since my mother died last year I'm quite alone." It was practically true; Eddie didn't really count.

The woman nodded in rueful sympathy. "Then I suppose—" she glanced at the dog stationed decorously at her side "—you also keep a pet?"

Sarah hesitated, loathe to interrupt the little flow of mutuality. "I'm afraid not," she admitted reluctantly, then hastened to make up for this lack by a show of interest. "Yours is such an attractive dog. What kind is it?"

"Oh," the woman shrugged, "she's just a mongrel. But very in-

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telligent." She addressed the dog. "Say hello to the lady, Jenny."

Right on cue Jenny uttered a soft little snuffle exactly as if she were acknowledging the introduction. It was so appealing that Sarah, though frankly a bit chary of dogs, tentatively extended a hand.

Jenny trotted forward and sniffed appraisingly, first at the proffered hand, then at Sarah's shoes. Then she moved back a few paces and stood looking up, tail wagging and tongue hanging out in what looked like a relaxed and amiable grin. And Sarah Enright, who'd never kept so much as a goldfish, found herself inordinately pleased to have passed some mysterious canine muster.

"Why, she's taken a fancy to you!" exclaimed the woman "She's usually a little shy at first of strangers." Clearly, Sarah was not only accepted by dogs, she was accepted by *choosy* dogs.

"You must like dogs," the woman said.

"Well—I don't know much about them really," Sarah protested with unconvincing modesty. The flat truth was she didn't know anything at all about dogs, or greatly care. But her little success with this one had rather gone to her head.

"But you have a feeling for them," the woman insisted. "Dogs *know*."

"Have you lived here long?" Sarah inquired warmly. This charming woman was certainly someone she'd like to know better.

"Oh, I don't *live* here. I just came to visit a friend who recently moved in. Only—well, perhaps you could help me, Miss Enright. When I arrived a young man was opening the front door so I came right into the lobby. But he went on up to his apartment and by the time I realized I had a problem, there was no one to ask. So could you tell me if there's anyone by the name of Anderson living in the building?"

Sarah frowned and shook her head. "I don't recall hearing the name. But, of course, if your friend just moved in . . ." She peered at the apartment directory.

"It's not listed there. I looked and looked." The woman sighed. "I just don't understand it." She fished in her purse and brought out a slip of paper to show Sarah. On it was written the name Anderson, then a telephone number; below that, an address.

"Well," said Sarah as she handed it back, "that's certainly the address of this building. Perhaps you copied one of the numbers wrong."

The woman nodded. "I guess I must have. So careless of me.

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Well." She sighed again wearily. "I'll just have to find a drugstore and call my friend. Come along, Jenny."

"Oh, wait—" At Sarah's words, the woman paused. "It's four or five blocks to the nearest drugstore. Why don't you come up and use my phone?"

"Well, I—oh, I would appreciate it. If you're sure you don't mind."

"Not at all," Sarah assured the woman, steering her toward the elevator. "It's my pleasure." She was, in fact, delighted at this opportunity, as she saw it, to wipe out the last traces of that unfortunate first impression. It was Sarah's lifelong belief that you could take the true measure of a person by the kind of home he kept. As the elevator rose, Sarah's thoughts ran happily ahead to her own tastefully furnished apartment; patently not the home of someone given to brash greetings in public places.

And the effect on her guest was everything Sarah could have wished.

"Oh, *nice*," the woman murmured. She stood on the threshold of the living room, her eyes moving appreciatively from one object to another "Yes, indeed. *Very* nice."

Sarah's glow of pride was marred only by a slight nervousness about what effect the dog might have on her new rug. But her guest, perhaps sensing Sarah's concern, proved as considerate as she was charming. Before she entered the room she said, "Sit, Jenny." And, obediently, the dog sat down in the hall just outside the door.

"She's so well trained," breathed the grateful Sarah.

"Oh, yes." The woman smiled. "Jenny always does what I ask."

Sarah pointed out the phone, then discreetly absented herself from the room so the woman could make her call in private.

As Sarah busied herself elsewhere she couldn't help thinking how beautifully everything had worked out after that awkward beginning. Why, they might still share the cosy pot of tea she had envisioned. And she set out her best tea service just in case.

When she ventured back to the living room, the woman was just finishing her call. "Enright," she said into the phone. "Apartment 4-C." Then she hung up. "My friend is stopping by for me," she explained to Sarah.

"Splendid." Sarah fairly beamed. "Then you can both join me in a cup of tea. I'll just put the kettle on . . ."

"No, no. Please."

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"It's no trouble—"

"That's very hospitable of you, but there really won't be time." The woman's tone was gracious but inarguably firm She looked about her in a curiously proprietary way, selected a straight-backed chair, and set it in the center of the room. "If you'll just sit here please."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Here—in this chair."

"But—what—"

Impatiently, the woman clapped her hands and the dog came bounding into the room. "Show the lady to the chair, Jenny," she said, pointing.

Whereupon the amiable Jenny underwent an alarming transformation. She bared her teeth and actually seemed, to Sarah's startled eyes, to grow somehow larger. Then with a series of no-nonsense growls, she herded Sarah to the appointed chair.

"*That's* better," the woman said in the manner of a kindly dentist to a reluctant child. She delved into her purse and brought forth several lengths of stout cord.

"What on earth—" spluttered Sarah.

"Oh, come, Miss Enright," the woman chided her. "I'm sure you must have guessed by now. You are gullible, but you don't strike me as stupid." So saying, she slipped Sarah's watch smoothly off her wrist, then with brisk efficiency tied Sarah's hands behind the chairback and bound each ankle to a front chair leg. "Guard, Jenny," she commanded the dog, and Jenny emitted a warning growl and inched a few paces closer to Sarah.

"As you observed," the woman went on pleasantly, "Jenny is very well trained. So long as you behave yourself, she won't harm you. But if you make any sudden movement or outcry, she knows what to do."

Sarah stared at the woman, expecting, *hoping* that she too would undergo some transformation, become surly and crude as befitted Sarah's idea of a common thief. But try as she would, Sarah could detect no change. The woman appeared as respectably ordinary as before. Sarah might have been looking at herself. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, feeling disoriented. Certain familiar signposts, which served to define her very existence, seemed imperceptibly to have shifted.

The woman, meanwhile, kept up a little conversational commentary, just as though Sarah were taking part. "Good leather,"

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she said approvingly as she picked up Sarah's handbag. "And I find a really large purse so useful, don't you?" Sarah turned her head away to escape those shrewd, inquisitive eyes.

"Well!" This in reaction to the sizable amount of cash in Sarah's wallet. "Do you always carry so much, my dear?" Then, after a thoughtful pause, "No. . ." There was a note of genuine sympathy in her voice. "It was payday, wasn't it? Well, lucky for me, unlucky for you."

At the sound of the downstairs door-buzzer, the woman looked sharply at Sarah. "Are you expecting anyone?"

Sarah wondered half-heartedly if it would do any good to lie. She gave up the notion and just shook her head.

"Good." The woman went and spoke briefly into the intercom. She pressed the button to release the downstairs door, and a few minutes later opened the door of the apartment to her friend.

The "friend", of course—Sarah was beyond surprise by now—was not the kindred gentlewoman she had so naively assumed, but a husky young man. And—oh, how clever of them—he was attired in some indeterminate but unassailably official-looking uniform.

There is a magic about a uniform, and not only because middle-class folk tend to accept a uniformed presence as legitimate, whatever the hour. If by chance they are later pressed to describe the individual wearing it, they are usually at a loss, having, it seems, registered little but the fact of the uniform.

As the young man came closer to Sarah, she could make out the words CUSTOM STORAGE stitched above the visor of his cap. The woman, noting the direction of Sarah's glance, said, "I did that myself. I find needlework so relaxing, don't you? Or perhaps you prefer a more exciting hobby." Then, almost gaily, she said, "Well—to work."

The young man, evidently as well trained as Jenny, promptly produced a folded bag. It was of some strong material and, when opened out, of considerable size. Then, unerringly bypassing the merely ornamental, Sarah's two "guests" proceeded to pick the living room clean of whatever of value would fit into the yawning bag.

They moved on to the bedroom and Sarah could no longer see them, only hear them opening drawers and closets. And, in a way, that was worse. For what she really hated, more even than the loss, was the idea of strangers poking into her personal belong-

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ings, into the private corners of her life.

When they emerged from the bedroom Sarah saw that the bag was nearly full. Perversely, she was almost glad of it. Maybe they had enough, maybe they'd just go now.

She waited, tensely hopeful, while they made a brief tour of her small kitchen. *Please, oh, please, just go now,* she begged silently as they started back along the hall, past the bathroom, past the linen cupboard—*oh, please*—past the hall closet . . . The young man paused and Sarah's heart sank. He gave the knob of the closet door a perfunctory turn, then a harder turn. "This one's locked," he said.

"Oh, please . . ." Sarah was scarcely aware she'd given voice to the words.

The woman looked at her with raised eyebrows. "You make me curious," she said. She walked over to Sarah's purse and took out the ring of keys. Then, inexorably, she tried one after the other until at last the closet door swung open on this most private corner of Sarah's life.

The closet was lined with shelves from top to bottom and on the shelves were row upon row of small objects, none larger than would slip easily into a good-sized purse; the booty of many a discreet foray during many a lunch hour. They had never been used. They were not meant to be used, only taken and kept and treasured. *"Sarah can take care of herself."* And so she had. The woman surveyed the illicit hoard with a keen, professional eye. "Well," she said, nodding, "so *that's* your hobby." And she laughed softly, a knowing, offensively chummy little sound.

Hearing it, Sarah shuddered, recognizing herself within the fellowship of thieves.

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DEPARTMENT OF "SECOND STORIES"

Ten years ago we published a story by Hector Hugh Munro ("Saki") titled "Circumstantial Evidence." It was a favorite of one of his great admirers, Christopher Morley, who once wrote of him: "The empty glass we turn down for him is the fragile, hollow-stemmed goblet meant for the dryest champagne; it is of the finest."

Here now is another toast to H. H. Munro, this one by the author of the 425th "first story" to appear in EQMM—"The Knife Salesman"—in our May 1975 issue. . .

WITH HOMAGE TO SAKI

by ISAK ROMUN

It was Clovis Sangrail who found Colonel Pax-Strathwaite that night seated in his study, a Burmese *dah* thrust through his heart and a Saki paperback in his lap, one hand holding the book open to the first page of *Sredni Vashtar*. Beastly heartless, thought Clovis. The killer could at least have let old Hubert read the story before sticking him.

Clovis surveyed the damage to his old friend of some forty odd years. The dead man was in a dressing gown covered with blood, much of which had trickled down his front, forming a little lap pool below the book. The paperback, which Clovis had given only that night to Hubert, was unmarked, miraculously clean of any blood. It appeared that, after he had been stabbed, the murdered man had taken the little volume off the side table, onto which he had carelessly thrown it earlier.

The elegant gray-haired, sixtyish man, gazing down at his dead friend, recalled the circumstances of his gift of the book.

It was doubtful that, aside from lapses in a generally unenlightened Sandhurst curriculum, the military officer had ever read a poem, a work in a light vein, or, for that matter, any kind of fiction. There was no time for that sort of tripe, the brusque

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Pax-Strathwaite contended, when there were so many other books to be read that imparted good solid knowledge—books on such diverse subjects as the mating dance of the Mozambique *papilio demodocus*, the oceanographic discoveries of Albert I of Monaco, and the military posture of the San Marinese Republic.

Then, too, there was Hubert's preoccupation with words. Ever since returning from Burma ten years ago, laden down with artifacts with which to adorn the walls of his study, Pax-Strathwaite had devoted himself to a resurgent interest in lexicography, a youthful avocation put in abeyance upon joining the colonial service.

It was, perhaps, to at least modify these dreary tendencies that Clovis, spying the paperback at the train-station bookstall, had bought it to bring to Waverly Manor, where he had been invited for the weekend by Pax-Strathwaite.

"What's this?" his friend had demanded fiercely, taking the fresh unopened book from Clovis. *"The Greatest of Saki,"* he read from the cover. "What's a Saki?"

"Not what, Hubert, who," Clovis corrected. "His real name was H. H. Munro. See, it's in parentheses below the pen name."

"Never heard of him. What's he written?"

"Short stories. But I assure you, Hubert, they're all winners. This author gets inside you. I feel as if I know him intimately—and vice versa," Clovis added reflectively.

"Bosh!"

"He was a soldier in the Great War," Clovis offered hopefully.

Pax-Strathwaite brightened. "What regiment did he head up?"

"I believe he was associated with the 22nd Royal Fusiliers," replied Clovis evasively, recalling that Saki died in 1916 in a shallow crater near Beaumont-Hamel.

"Nonetheless, I don't go in for that sort of rot," barked Pax-Strathwaite. "No time for that stuff. Always keep trying, though, don't you?"

That was when the colonel tossed the paperback upon the side table, where it lay all that night until, close to his last breath, he had, presumably, picked it up.

As Clovis stood in the death room his mind was filled with images of the other house guests, Pax-Strathwaite's three daughters and their generally worthless spouses. Clovis had been invited up as a sort of buffer between them and their widower father when he told them that he had resolved to delete them from his will. It

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was the colonel's intention to leave his substantial monies to a foundation for subsidizing lexicographical and etymological studies.

"Bad tactic, old soldier," Clovis chided the dead man. "You should have changed the will first, then passed out the bad news. Now let's call them down and see some sport." Whereupon he pulled a bell cord and waited some minutes for Pax-Strathwaite's man, Boggins, to materialize.

When that worthy, the colonel's former batman, did appear, he cast one look at his master and said, "Lor', guvnor, what 'appened 'ere?"

"Your colonel's been dispatched," Clovis replied shortly. "Summon the others and we'll have a go at seeing who did it. And, ah, Boggins, check the doors and windows while you're about it."

The first to show up was daughter Opportuna with her French husband, Claude Furet, in tow. Then came Dolland, hand-in-hand with her most recent of three mates, an aging, nondescript, overfed jockey. Finally, ushered in by Boggins, came Morwenna, Lady Mando, murmuring apologies for her titled but impoverished spouse, indisposed abovestairs with a touch of the ptomaine.

"Well, now, why are we here?" yawned Lady Mando unconcernedly. "Something about our father? Boggins was so vague."

Clovis had been standing in front of the dead man's chair. He now stepped aside. "It appears to be murder, m'lady," he replied with equal *sang-froid*.

To their credit, the daughters affected a decent show of sorrow as they viewed their father's bloodied form. Lady Mando recovered first and said, "Not surprising, the way he left everything about. A thief no doubt." Her arm swept around the room, indicating the Burmese artifacts which included a Naga spear, a Palaung woman's neck rings, a Shan warrior's sword, the bronzed ear of a Chin dacoit.

"It seems hardly likely, m'lady," Clovis interjected sweetly. "Only one item, the *dah*, appears to be missing from the walls, and almost certainly acquisitiveness did not prompt its removal."

"Surprised, no doubt, at the very beginning of the thievery," Opportuna offered, "the killer must have lunged at my father, stabbed him, and then escaped, forgetting his original purpose in coming here."

This theory enjoyed the willing concurrence of Opportuna's

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husband, who wagged his head up and down in that tiresome Latin manner. The others, more restrained, nodded gravely. Boggins, at the door, remained impassive.

Clovis marveled at their composure and almost clinical detachment as they went on for some minutes reconstructing the details of Pax-Strathwaite's demise. After awhile, he broke in. "I don't think we have a case for an outside intruder. Why would a thief, as a thief, take the *dah* from the wall and leave its sheath?" They all looked at the wall to verify what they knew to be true. "Boggins' job it is to lock up. Let's ask him if any of the doors or windows show signs of being forced."

"Naow, guvnor, nary a one, all secure," Boggins reported with military smartness.

"Could an intruder have locked a window or door as he went out?"

"Naow. All must be secured inside, sah."

"There, you see, the thief idea seems out," Clovis explained to the others.

"Can you mean," asked Dolland in a tremulous voice, "that one of us killed Father?"

"Don't be obtuse, Dolland. Of course that is precisely what he means," Morwenna said drily. "I see it now. Look at Father. There he sits. Do you believe he would sit still as a thief stabbed him? No, it had to be someone he knew. Someone he thought would not have the moral courage to use the *dah*, probably being examined under the pretext of a hitherto unknown interest in oriental weaponry."

"But who—" Dolland tried to ask.

"Well, perhaps we can find out," Morwenna replied. "What's that Father is holding?"

"A little book I gave him when I came tonight," Clovis helpfully pointed out. "I was hoping to interest him in something a little lighter, but not less substantial, than the fare to which he was used. Do you think the book has some significance?"

"I think so, Mr. Sangrail," Morwenna responded briskly. "I believe Father was leaving us a message and that message was the identity of his killer."

At this, everyone stared at Morwenna, a tableau looking comically like a music-hall blackout. Clovis was the first to speak. "Then please do tell us, Lady Mando, so that we can all know as much as you."

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Morwenna walked over to her father's body. "It seems apparent," she said. "Note the story to which the book is opened, *Sredni Vashtar*. In the story, Mr. Sangrail, what was Sredni Vashtar?"

"Why, a ferret."

"And what do the French call a ferret, Mr. Sangrail?"

"I believe *furet*, but my French is abominable. In my trips to the Continent, I patronize only those shops displaying 'English Spoken Here' signs."

But no one was listening to Clovis. Instead, all attention had focused on Opportuna's husband. Boggins, plainly with mischief in mind, had begun to advance upon the hapless Frenchman.

"Hold!" ordered Clovis, raising a restraining hand. Boggins stopped and all transferred their staring to Clovis.

"Quite right, Mr. Sangrail," Morwenna approved. "Personal vengeance is a tacky affair at best and, at worst, chips away at the majesty of the law."

"Actually, the events of tonight remind me of the plight of Newlyn Cashton-Ewell," Clovis began. "He was quite sane despite a tendency to live within his means at a time when respectability demanded that you live beyond them. Took to farming, I recall, and succeeded at it. Newlyn's prosperity elevated him to the higher reaches of local society. Soon he found himself speaking to church groups, judging suet pie at parish fairs, advising on the best time to market sheep, and attending with unaccustomed regularity the various hunt meets across the country. It was one of these that circumstanced his downfall.

"Poor Newlyn Cashton-Ewell had been thrown into new situations for which he was ill prepared. Nevertheless, he accepted these situations with a good heart, hoping to play at their peripheries and thus not commit himself with any great show of resolution. However, one day at a meet he and the hounds got off from the others. In no time at all he found himself in the midst of the dogs which were baying at the fox ensconced some little way up on a stone ledge. The faint note of horn told Newlyn that the others would soon be riding up. He looked at the fox and the fox looked back. In that instant, Newlyn felt as one with the little beast. As if he, too, were stranded on some unfriendly ledge all because he had ventured out of the safe haven of his prosperous farm into the attractive treacheries of village and county sociability. In another moment, he knew what he had to do. He fought off

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the dogs, rode over to the ledge, gripped the fox, and sped away with it."

"And what happened?" Claude Furet spoke for the first time.

"A tragedy. He was bitten by the fox, which was rabid, and died in great agony soon after," Clovis answered. "He was buried from the village chapel with a great show of community mourning, but I suspect all were happy that things had gone the way they had. Saved them the uncomfortable task of returning Newlyn to the obscurity from which he had been lured."

"Mr. Sangrail, what does your little story have to do with our situation here?" Morwenna demanded in her most imperious Lady Mando voice.

"Don't you see? Poor Newlyn Cashton-Ewell was assumed capable of a role simply because appearances suggested that he could play it."

"I still don't understand."

"Because your father is found with a book open to *Sredni Vashtar,* a story of a ferret, we assume him capable of using this story, which I know he had never read or even heard of, to implicate Monsieur Furet over there." Clovis gestured toward the Frenchman, then paused to let the others digest the content of his statement. "Your father could no more use *Sredni Vashtar* than Cashton-Ewell could participate in the death of that fox."

"Then you think the book has no significance?" Morwenna asked weakly.

"On the contrary, Lady Mando, I think it has great significance," Clovis reassured. "In his dying moments, your father's eyes may have chanced upon the little paperback I had given him. Perhaps he saw how his knowledge of provincial and standard language, gained through his interest in lexicography, would point to his killer. So all he did was pick up the book, sure that, in itself, it would point out the killer for us. The author's name is the clue, you know."

"Saki?"

"No, his real name—Munro," Clovis answered. "Take the two syllables of that name. In provincial English *mun* means "man" while *roe*, spelled r-o-e, is the female deer or doe—here spell it d-o. Understand?" Boggins understood. As the manservant turned to the door facing out on the hall and the stairwell beyond, Morwenna threw herself across the opening, arms outspread. The clash of these two was arrested, however, not by any move of the

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others but by a series of heavy, insistent knocks upon the house's front door.

As Constable Hoskins came down the stairway, Clovis accosted him. "What did you find up there, Constable?"

"Lord Mando hanging by his neck, quite dead. Some clothes he had worn, all bloodied. And a written-out confession."

"How did you know to come? Did the redoubtable Boggins call you?"

"No, sir. Lord Mando himself called—I suppose after Lady Mando had gone downstairs in response to your summons."

"Just as well that Mando decided on that course of action. Colonel Pax-Strathwaite had pretty well pointed to him."

"No such thing, sir," said the constable with patient finality. "The colonel died instantly. Through the heart, you know. No chance for a last grab at that book. Lady Mando went down after her husband, all bloodied and talkative, came upstairs. She put the book in the colonel's hand and opened it to the first page of *Sredni Vashtar* in order to frame Monsieur Turet."

Clovis pondered Morwenna's action. Surely a woman who knew her Saki was not beyond redemption.

Clovis thanked the policeman and turned away. Officious civil servants! Always upsetting the careful deductive work of brilliant amateurs. He smiled at his foolishness. He held the smile as he thought of the news that would be announced on the morrow. Perhaps just minutes before the murder, Boggins and he had witnessed a new will made out by Pax-Strathwaite.

Now that was a twist Saki would have appreciated!

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a NEW short story by

JACOB HAY

The charming tale of a British intelligence agent who becomes an impeccable, imperturbable gentleman's gentleman, "an imitation Jeeves," to a wealthy American playboy, Chalfont Cadwallader Worthington, and how he proved worthy of Worthy's trust — and charming is le mot juste.

MY MAN BERTRAM

by JACOB HAY

If, barely ten years ago, anybody would have predicted that I should find myself out of the Service and playing an imitation Jeeves to Chalfont Cadwallader Worthington's American version of Bertie Wooster, I would have advised him to visit a sound psychiatrist or forego his second after-dinner brandy. I might, come to that, have given him a swift right on the chops.

As a matter of fact, I make quite a capable Jeeves, though I say it myself. Mr. Worthington has, thus far, had no complaints as to my services, and it seems highly unlikely that he ever will. He is not what I can honestly describe as a very bright young man, but he is aware that the State of New York takes a dim view of murder, as well it should. Having committed a few in my time, I take a rather more tolerant view, but then, I am not the State of New York.

I am simply Worthington's man Bertram, which is, of course, not my real name at all, but it would be most indiscreet of me to reveal the name with which I was christened in a small village church in Devon. I commit this narrative to paper primarily for the benefit of others of my colleagues in the Service who may have found (or will find) themselves in my own peculiar situation.

Others have written that there is nothing more utterly useless to an intelligence organization than an agent whose cover has been blown. He is both an embarrassment and a danger. For the agent it is especially annoying, once his cover has been blown, to

c, 1976 by Jacob Hay.

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consummate some complex deal for diplomatic purposes of which he knows not a damned thing, as was the case with me. Certain arrangements are made to insure that he receives a small pittance in reward for his invaluable services to the Crown, and then he is tactfully (or sometimes with brutal bluntness, depending on the nature of his superior) advised to leave his country for his country's good and (stout old cliché) "begin a new life." The necessary, albeit quite false, credentials are provided gratis.

Start a new life? Trained for what? And where to start this splendid new existence? These are hard questions, and they are not made any easier when you've just lost your fiancée, which is the politest word I can substitute for mistress. I had had every intention of marrying Elaine when the fullness of time should have retired me to a nice safe desk job in Whitehall; unfortunately, I could never convince her that there are certain maneuvers that even a Jag XKE simply cannot perform, a lesson she learned ultimately the hard way.

In any event, since I was obviously not much wanted in the United Kingdom, and since I had no urge to try my hand at sheep ranching in Australia, and since my countrymen were coming home in droves and in a most undignified haste from the emerging nations of Africa, I opted for the States, where things appeared to be blooming. Rather than fly, I took one of the blessed old Cunard Queens to give me a bit of time to think. For the life of me I couldn't see myself becoming a "private eye," as the Yanks call them. Nor did I relish the prospect of putting my British accent to work as a clerk in some high-priced men's shop.

It was sheerest chance that on the second day out of Southampton I should have wandered into the ship's elegant library and picked out an opus by P. G. Wodehouse, who'd always been one of my favorites. And there was my answer. I'd been used to service all my life — a County Family without a butler was simply not a County Family — my scout at New College had been aware of my needs before I knew I needed them, as the best Oxford scouts are. And I felt I had reasonably good taste in such matters as clothing and wines.

So why the hell not?

It was thus, through the services of an extremely stuffy New York employment agency, that I came into the home of Chalfont Cadwallader Worthington shortly after my predecessor had the misfortune of absent-mindedly stepping in front of a taxicab.

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"Worthy," as he was known to his intimates and the society columnists, was, at the time, ensconced in the ancestral townhouse in the East Seventies, fighting the wolf from the door with the income from a series of trust funds of staggering proportions, and his primary occupation in life was fighting off the ennui that so often affects the very rich. He was, I discovered, when I went (not without a certain amount of trepidation) to my inspection-interview, a tall, slightly portly, blond young man and, like myself, a bachelor, although not by choice. It was simply, as I was to learn, that it took any attractive young woman with even a minimal intelligence only two or three dates with Worthy to ascertain beyond all possible doubt that he hadn't a brain in his skull.

He was impeccably mannered (a distinct disadvantage in these times of the liberation of women), and he made every effort to be charming, but his conversation was something less than sparkling. Yet perhaps I've put it too strongly — Worthy did have a brain, but it had never been required to produce an idea. Such things, he appeared to feel, were best left to the ancient law firm which saw to his affairs.

That initial interview went as smoothly as I could have wished.

"My needs," Worthy told me, his tone close to embarrassed, "are very simple. I do move about a bit — summers at the old family cottage in Bar Harbor, the worst of winter at the cottage in Bermuda." (Later I was to learn that my employer's idea of a "cottage" hardly coincided with the definition provided by the Oxford English Dictionary.) "I'm not a terribly good driver, I should add. I trust you can handle a Rolls?"

"Certainly, sir. And with all due modesty I believe I can call myself a most competent chauffeur."

"That settles it then. Let me show you your quarters."

My quarters turned out to be a sitting room, bedroom, and private bath, and God knows how much it would have cost to rent as a bachelor's flat. I professed myself to be quite satisfied and allowed my correct British reserve to bend so far as to observe that they would do me very nicely.

Worthy's "needs" proved to be, in very truth, exceedingly simple, and I felt, after the first month, almost guilty about accepting my first generous pay check; I was living what amounted to a millionaire's life and getting paid for it. And driving the Rolls was sheer pleasure. My employer was fussy on only two subjects; his morning Bloody Marys and his cocktail-hour Martinis, in the

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preparation of which I pride myself on a good deal of expertise. Indeed, I used a medical syringe to inject precisely the three droplets of dry vermouth Worthy required for his Martinis.

A daily maid spared me practically all household chores. Mrs. Brautigan was Irish and had been raised up for service in the old-fashioned British tradition; in sum, a gem, and she and I hit it off famously, especially after I insisted on relieving her of the task of polishing the silverware. Polishing silverware (and this is only a personal theory) gives a man time to meditate, and there is a certain satisfaction, almost sensual, in watching the metal gleam ever more brightly.

Much of the time we had the place to ourselves. Worthy, by virtue of his name and position, was a member of any number of boards of foundations, museums, and similar institutions, and spent much of his time at their meetings, at which, I feel certain, he was always the most elegantly groomed member present. He had excellent taste in his clothing, and keeping his London-made footwear properly shined gave me nearly as much enjoyment as my labors with the silver.

After the first few months I decided that William Thomas Bertram (as my passport called me) had never had it so good, and I began to wonder why Major-my-former-self had wasted all those years running senseless, secret errands on behalf of senseless, secret missions. The bitterness I'd initially felt when my cover had been blown turned into something approaching gratitude.

My wages were almost what I would have been getting had I remained in the Service, and with no living expenses to speak of, my savings mounted rapidly.

Happily, too, I found no problems in getting along with the caretakers who looked after Worthy's "cottages" in Bar Harbor and Bermuda.

By another fortunate circumstance Worthy did not enjoy travel to foreign climes. He'd tried it a couple of times and had found it depressing. He liked England, but found that the signs of its gradual decline from imperial glory made him melancholy. The French, he thought, were cold and mercenary, the Italians too noisy, and the Spaniards too arrogant. The Germans were also arrogant, but they were simply dull, as he found the Scandinavians. Thus Major-my-former-self was spared the possibility of encountering a former opposite with good and sufficient reason to wish me dead.

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As I've mentioned, Worthy was not much in the way of conversation with anybody, and while we preserved all the proper amenities I did not become, as I'd half expected, his confidant; he neither brought me his troubles nor sought my advice except on those rare occasions when he would ask my opinion as to which of several neckties might look best with the shirt and suit he'd selected for the day.

Taking his lifestyle into account, it never for a moment occurred to me that Chalfont Cadwallader Worthington could ever, in the most remote circumstances, get into trouble of any sort. Which is why it was such a shock when it came. In spades, and first in the form of Miss Loretta Leigh, an aspiring young actess who had a small role in the smash Broadway musical, "Bootsie," of which Worthy was one of the principal backers. Backing theatrical ventures was, insofar as I could tell, my employer's sole vice (or character flaw, if you want to put it another way), but "Bootsie" was his first smasheroo after years of investing in a succession of truly dismal failures. He was as proud of "Bootsie" as if he'd written, directed, and produced the whole thing all by himself.

"You'll love it, Bertram," he insisted when he presented me with a complimentary ticket. "It combines the best of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and the Gershwins, not to mention Jerome Kern."

Obediently I went to see "Bootsie," and concluded that New York's drama critics were far sicker than they knew when they gave it their raves. But I digress.

In any event, shortly after it became evident that "Bootsie" was in for a long run, Worthy astonished me by fetching Miss Leigh back to our elegant domicile for a post-performance nightcap, exercising a modified, modern version of the medieval *droit du seigneur*. I had not taken particular note of her performance in the show, but she was unquestionably a stunner of the sort one beholds in the centerfolds of certain men's magazines. And about as bright as a penny which has been buried in the mud for a century or so, I concluded from the brief snatches of conversation between them, overheard as I served up the obligatory caviar and champagne.

I will not bore you with a sampling of Miss Leigh's half of the intimate duologue; you'll just have to take my word for it. Yet it was all too clear that Worthy was infatuated. But then he spent a

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lot of his time in a state of infatuation, so I was not unduly alarmed, especially after Worthy brought her home for a fourth evening. This, I told myself, would be it — even a Loretta Leigh could not possibly endure a fifth evening exchanging inanities with Chalfont Cadwallader Worthington, after it had become obvious that he had no ungentlemanly intentions of making a pass at her.

But a sixth and seventh evening convinced me that the prospect of marrying the Worthington trust funds had numbed Miss Leigh's limited intelligence to the point of stupor.

As for Worthy? "Absolutely marvelous girl, Miss Leigh," he declared firmly one morning as I served him his breakfast coffee. "Dedicated to her art, but I'm afraid the theater has limited her horizons to a certain extent."

"Indeed, sir?" inquired the impeccable Bertram, ever solicitous of his master's interests. "In what way, may I ask?"

"Well, as an instance," Worthy replied, just a bit uneasily, "when I showed her my favorite Picasso — the one in the library — she said, somewhat surprisingly, 'Gosh, I didn't know Tony could paint.'

"'Tony?' I asked her, to which her reply was, 'Sure — Tony Picasso. I thought he just ran that restaurant of his down in the Village. Imagine that, him being one of the best spaghetti cooks and a painter all at the same time. Isn't that something?'"

"I take your point, sir," the imperturbable Bertram said, wincing inwardly. "But I'm told the demands of the theater do tend to absorb one's interests almost entirely."

"I've got the Hallingsley Foundation Board meeting this morning," Worthy said, abruptly dismissing Miss Leigh from his thoughts. "Should I wear the glen plaid or the blue chalk-stripe?"

"May I suggest a plain gray flannel, sir, with a Yale Club tie?"

"Sound thinking, Bertram. They're a stuffy bunch. Lay them out for me, then, and I think a plain white shirt is indicated under the circumstances."

"Quite so, sir."

The crisis situation arose (as these things tend so often to do) suddenly and without warning that very same evening. Worthy had attended his board meeting and the customary sumptuous lunch which followed, returned home for an afternoon nap to recover from the morning's exertions, had dinner, and then repaired to the library to study the Hallingsley Foundation's Annual Re-

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port, of which, I feel reasonably certain, he understood nary a word. But duty was duty, and Worthy was deeply conscious of the responsibilities of great wealth for the welfare of the less privileged.

To prepare him for his labors, I'd set out a decanter of brandy on the side table beside his favorite armchair. After which I repaired to the kitchen to join Mrs. Brautigan, who did double duty as our cook, for a glass of port before she left for the day, having cleaned up after Worthy's solitary dinner. It had become our custom, and a very pleasant one it was. She had a fine, truly Irish sense of humor, and I was touched by her devotion to Worthy, who had, it seems, quietly seen to it that the son of one of New York's Finest, slain in line of duty, should be sent through both college and law school.

"My son wants me to come and live with him and his family up in Syracuse," she told me once, "but that's askin' for trouble, and I'd never dream of leavin' Mr. Worthy, not after all he's done for me. I know he has his lawyers and all that folderol, Mr. Bertram, but without the likes of you and me the poor man would be lost."

This evening, after our ritual two (and only two) glasses of port, Mrs. Brautigan took her departure, while I made myself comfortable in the kitchen to read and await my master's call, should he require my services, or his retirement to the pajamas I had earlier laid out for him, and a good night's sleep in the peaceful knowledge that at least he'd tried to comprehend the Hallingsley Foundation's Annual Report. I'd barely settled down to the day's newspapers when I heard the mellow chimes that signaled a caller at our front door. I moved at once to answer the summons.

It was thus that I encountered Mr. Stanley Ash (known, as I was later to learn, as "Ash the Flash" in his own unsavory circles), waiting outside our iron-grilled, plate-glass double front doors. He was approximately of Worthy's build, but dark rather than blond, and rather menacingly handsome. His attire, while clearly expensive, suggested the thinking of the tailors of Beverly Hills, Cal., rather than that of Savile Row or Cork Street, and he was definitely not the sort of person whom I would have associated with C. C. Worthington. His manner was abrupt and surly.

"I got an appointment with your boss," he advised as I let him into the foyer. "Just tell him it's Stan Ash."

Somewhat to my surprise, Worthy appeared to be expecting his caller, and bade me show him in and fetch another brandy glass.

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So, having taken our guest's cashmere topcoat and expensive Borsalino hat, I showed him into the library, and went to my pantry to fetch the requisite extra glass.

"That will be all for the present," Worthy said, as I poured Mr. Ash's glass. Which meant that I was to stand by for the possibility of having to drive Ash home in the Rolls. I repaired once more to the kitchen and the pleasures of Mr. Russell Baker's always witty comments in *The Times*. I had barely finished the last paragraph when the buzzer from the library sounded with what seemed an unusual urgency.

Worthy was standing by the hearth, a cast-iron poker in his hand. On the floor between the hearth and the long deep leather sofa fronting it lay Mr. Stanley Ash, who was, I immediately perceived from considerable experience, now checking out his credentials with the Keepers of the Pearly Gates, or more likely halfway across the Styx.

"I've killed him, my God, I've killed him," Worthy was muttering in disbelief.

I knelt swiftly by the procumbent form of Mr. Ash and confirmed that he was quite dead.

"He came at me like a tiger," Worthy added. "Like a damn tiger."

It was time for Major-my-former-self to take charge; this was, as it were, more my line of country. I gently removed the poker from Worthy's shaking hand and urged him into an armchair, after which I hauled the late Ash behind a Chinese screen which formed a part of the library's décor. I did not wish Worthy to be unduly distracted while I got the facts straight, which might take time, since people unused to violence are prone to incoherence in its presence.

The story was as mundane as any you might find in one of those confession magazines — that of the insanely jealous lover, i.e., Ash, come to avenge himself on the cad who had, in his opinion, stolen the affections of his lady love, i.e., Miss Leigh. Probably already a little smashed when he arrived, Ash had tossed back his brandy, begun to rant, and finally came after Worthy, who had seized the nearest instrument of defense, i.e., the poker, and being unused to handling such a weapon, had struck back with more than the necessary force.

It was clearly a matter of self-defense, and the obvious next move was to call the police, explain the situation, and forget the whole untidy business. But I abruptly abandoned this line of

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thinking when Worthy blurted out that, in the course of their dispute, Mr. Ash had noted pointedly that *l'affaire Leigh* had become "a family matter," and that the "family" strongly disapproved of Worthy's attentions to the fiancée of one of its members.

That word "family" tickled the hairs on the back of my neck. Even if the police exonerated Worthy, the Family would not. If, on the other hand, Ash simply vanished . . .

Causing a person to vanish is not always the simple matter it might seem to the untutored, but in my previous incarnation I'd brought it off successfully on a number of occasions. The problem is that these operations take a certain amount of time and careful planning, and at this juncture we had little or none. But are not these precisely the situations to which a gentleman's gentleman is expected to rise to the occasion with aplomb? I could do no less.

"If you will allow me the use of the Rolls for a couple of days, sir," I said, pouring Worthy another brandy, "I believe the problem can be solved with a minimum of difficulty. You can advise Mrs. Brautigan that I have been given leave to visit an ailing relative, should her curiosity be aroused by my absence. Also, that along the way, I dropped the Rolls by the garage for some minor adjustments."

Worthy took a mighty gulp of his brandy.

"I leave the arrangements entirely in your hands, my dear Bertram. I'm much too shocked to do any thinking about this hideous mess." He stared wretchedly at the Chinese screen. "But what about — that?" he asked.

"You need not concern yourself, sir. If I may suggest, a good night's rest. A sleeping pill might assist. I trust you will not mind getting your own breakfast coffee, as I expect to be gone quite early."

Since he was, understandably, not entirely steady on his feet, I escorted Worthy upstairs to his bedroom and saw him safely to bed. I wasn't sure how well a sleeping pill might sit on his earlier brandies, but I doubted if it could do any harm, apart from a possibly monstrous hangover the following morning.

It was then necessary to work with some expediency. My first move was to haul the unfortunate Ash bodily downstairs to the basement, where the Rolls was housed in what had originally been a part of the Worthington wine cellar and had since been converted into a garage. I then stuffed him unceremoniously into the trunk compartment of the great gleaming car, after which I

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returned to the library, carefully wiped the poker to remove fingerprints (one can never be too careful about such minor details — there was always the remote possibility of some sort of police investigation, especially if the Family surreptitiously tipped off the authorities concerning Ash's intense dislike of Worthy), then carefully swept up the shattered remains of Ash's brandy glass, undoubtedly dropped when the poker smashed against his skull. I left the brandy decanter and Worthy's glass in place, as was customary. This done, I checked out every inch of the room for any suspicious signs, and found none.

Early the next morning, wearing my chauffeur's uniform, I eased the Rolls quietly out of its basement garage and headed out of the city — destination, Worthy's twenty acres of private estate in Bar Harbor. It was a miserable gray morning, which was fine by me.

It was somewhere in the general area of Stamford that I heard a sound from the rear of the car that nearly caused me to run the Rolls off the road. It was the voice of Mrs. Dorothy (have I mentioned that her first name was "Dorothy"?) Brautigan, and it was saying, "Mother of God, where are we?"

Somehow I managed to regain a badly shattered composure.

"We are on the way to Mr. Worthy's estate in Bar Harbor," I told her calmly. "He has asked me to drive up to pick up a few personal items. But what, may I ask, are you doing here?"

"Oh, Mr. Bertram," she wailed, "I'm so ashamed of myself. It was the port. Sometimes it hits me when I least expect it, and when that happens, and I know that Mr. Worthy will be in for the evening, I just sneak downstairs and have a little nap here in the back seat until it wears off."

"And then?" I asked sternly.

"Why, I sneak out the back door and go home. It would never do for Mr. Worthy's housekeeper to be seen in public not — er — quite herself, as you might say."

Some fast thinking was required. Under no circumstances did I wish to return to New York. I decided to emulate the example of one of my more recent ancestors when his squadron of The Light Brigade did its thing at Balaclava; to wit, Press On.

"As long as we're this far," I said, "you may as well come the whole way. You can check out the cottage while we're at it. We'll stop shortly, and you can phone Mr. Worthy that you're feeling indisposed today and won't be in."

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"Well, a holiday will do me no harm, and there's nothing important needs doin' back at the house, so why not? An unexpected outing is always more fun, I always say."

It was the first time I'd ever seen Mrs. Brautigan in street clothing, rather than in her customary uniform of black dress and white apron, and I observed that, apart from looking slightly rumpled from her nap, she was dressed in excellent taste. With her hair let down from her usual tight housekeeper's bun, she was, in point of fact, quite attractive, and I put her close to my own age, in the mid-forties.

It is, for all the new highways, still one hell of a long drive from New York to Bar Harbor. It seems even longer when you've got a corpse in the trunk. And I didn't dare let the Rolls have its head — the last thing I wanted was to be flagged down by some State Police cruiser. To keep my mind off my cargo and the job that lay ahead, I set about learning more about Mrs. Dorothy Brautigan, and by the time we passed Boston to begin the long run north, we had arrived at a first-name basis. For a largely self-educated woman, she was remarkably well read and had an astonishing range of interests.

It was well after dark when we arrived at the caretakers' cottage at the beginning of the lane leading to Worthy's domicile. I stopped and advised the Wilsons that Mrs. Brautigan and I had been dispatched to pick up some personal items for Mr. Worthington and would probably be spending the night in the servants' quarters over the garage, leaving early the following morning. They need not trouble themselves. The idea of Mrs. Brautigan and me spending the night alone in the servants' quarters did not appear to shock the Wilsons in the least — they were of that stoic Maine type that seems unshockable. Ask them no questions, and they'd tell you no lies.

It was all quite proper, you comprehend. And I'd no time for hanky-panky. I had work to do. As we'd had no time to stop along the way, Mrs. Brautigan (or Dorothy, as I shall now call her) prepared what used to be called a light collation in the cottage's kitchen, which was always kept stocked with the essentials, after which I insisted that she retire, having had a long and exhausting day, a suggestion to which she readily agreed. I, too, made as if to repair to my own quarters. And when I felt quite sure Dorothy was well off to dreamland, I sneaked down to the garage below to see to the remains of Mr. Ash.

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Getting a limp corpse into the trunk of a Rolls is not an easy task at best. Getting it out, once *rigor mortis* has set in, is a chore for giants or prestidigitators, requiring more grunting and puffing than is desirable in clandestine efforts, especially when one is working in total darkness, as I felt it wisest to do. I'd just got the late Ash laid out on the floor behind the Rolls when I was momentarily blinded as the garage lights went on, and I heard Dorothy speaking in her proper housekeeper's firm tones, "Will Bertram, what deviltry is it you're up to now?" From where she was standing, at the head of the stairs, she could plainly see friend Ash, curled up like a middle-aged foetus.

There are times when frankness becomes a necessity, so I told her the whole grim story. "No *corpus delicti*, no crime," I concluded, a trifle lamely.

"And so you're goin' to bury the rogue out there in the woods somewhere, then?" she asked. I nodded. "Then you'll be needin' help," she declared firmly. "Mr. Worthy is a fine man, a good man, for all that he hasn't got all that much inside his head. And, after all, the poor lad was only tryin' to save his own life."

"But I can't let you get involved in this," I protested.

"Nonsense! I'm already involved. After all, I'm here, aren't I? You carry that" — she motioned toward Ash — "and I'll fetch a shovel. Come along, man, we've not all that much time to spare."

Hamlet's gravediggers would have scoffed at my efforts, but the end result was satisfactory enough, and thus we laid to rest the mortal remains of one Stanley Ash, covering the gravesite with fallen leaves. No bloodhound would ever find the place, since I'd carried Ash slung over my shoulder, and rested him on a blanket Dorothy had thoughtfully brought along. The entire experience, following that interminable drive from New York, had left me in a state of utter physical exhaustion and the deepest of guilt. Somehow, burying a man, even a scoundrel like Ash, in nothing more than a blanket seemed uncivilized, although it had not been an uncommon practice during my years with the Service. Add to this burden the even heavier one of knowing that I had made Mrs. Brautigan — Dorothy — an accomplice to murder, if my exceedingly limited knowledge of the law were correct.

But hold!

Despite the fatigues of the day and night the Bertram brain was still functioning. A husband and wife cannot be forced to testify against one another.

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"Will Bertram," said Dorothy, once I'd explained the legal niceties, "I've liked you since the day you came to work for Mr. Worthy. And after you offered to polish the silver — well . . ." She sighed. "And I've never looked forward to going home to that little empty apartment of mine with no man waitin' to give me a hug and a kiss."

Worthy was absolutely splendid about the whole thing, especially after I had assured him privately that his problem had been quietly solved. He also accepted without protest my rather firmly worded suggestion (and here I found myself using the tone of Major-the-former-me) that he should sell off his share in "Bootsie" and see no more of Miss Loretta Leigh. And nothing less than a South American cruise would do for our honeymoon.

"I think," he said, after we'd shaken hands, "you'll find this adequate for walking-around money." When I opened the envelope he then handed me, I discovered that Worthy's concept of "walking-around money" was not too different from his version of a "cottage." $10,000 in Travellers Cheques can wear out a lot of soles.

When we returned, we discovered that in our absence he had enlarged my own quarters into a more than adequate apartment. I am happy to say that Mrs. Bertram and I are happily continuing to provide our employer with the best service of which we are capable, and that our rather hastily arranged marriage has proved more than satisfactory.

Thus I was in the happy position of being able to make an apt reply to a telephone caller just this past month, only a day or two after our first wedding anniversary. My caller spoke with a crisp British accent.

"Bertram," he said, in that bored tone they learn in the Guards, "the Service would rather like to see you return to active duty. With, of course, an appropriate promotion and the usual perks, possibly even a gong to mark your unselfish services, and all that rot."

I recognized the voice. Bloody idiot who'd assented to blowing my cover and whose intelligence made Worthy seem, by comparison, a positive genius. At least a Brigadier by now. So I made my apt reply.

"Drop dead," I said courteously, "sir."

It was time for my two glasses of port with Dorothy in the

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kitchen, so I had much more important matters to attend.

In all fairness I should conclude this narrative with the mention that, at least to date, we have had absolutely no reaction from the Family, which is apparently accustomed to having one or another of its members vanish from time to time. Miss Leigh has since retired from the musical stage and is reputedly happily married to an oil tycoon in Houston. Which would seem to wrap up all the loose ends. One likes to be tidy about such things, doesn't one?

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

WHO KILLED THE MISTRESS OF THE MANOR?

by MICKEY LANFORD

The butler is our culprit? That's really quite absurd.
Don't even try to mention it;
You'll only get the bird.

The upstairs maid? I'd be afraid to whisper such a clue.
If you persist, the master's fist
May be the end of you.

That furtive cook, with evil look, so handy to the poison?
Forget it, friend, and let it end
With you on the horizon.

Call off your hordes, my 'tective friend,
Before you lose your mind.
Surely you know, though wives come and go,
Good help is hard to find!

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a NEW Jason Dark story by

HUGH PENTECOST

Quadrant International, a multinational corporation selling thousands of products and services worldwide—machines, media, transportation lines. At its head a man who so thoroughly believes might is right that he considers himself above all conventional rules . . .

Jason Dark, ex-police detective with a bitter memory of a masked QI hireling chopping his right hand into bloody shreds . . .

Death for the king of an empire was too simple. The only real punishment for the king would be to destroy his empire, to shatter his power. Could one man, a one-handed man, destroy an empire more powerful than many governments, with wealth greater than most people could realistically imagine? Jason Dark thinks he can. With patience and care and cunning he thinks he can . . .

THE DARK ENCOUNTER

by HUGH PENTECOST

Carter Cleaves, his modishly styled hair nicely gray at the temples, his dark blue tropical worsted suit expertly tailored at the shoulders, his feet lovingly shod in calf by a Florentine bootmaker, leaned back in an armchair in his suite in New York's posh Hotel Beaumont. He was smiling in a detached sort of way, as if he was politely ignoring his sensitive olfactory system. It was the garishness of the man who straddled a straight-backed chair facing him that offended Cleaves. He saw crew-cut black hair, narrow but shrewd black eyes, a ghastly plaid sports jacket, offensive hound's-tooth slacks, white buckskin shoes (soiled), and a batique sports shirt (unbelievable). Cleaves, a disciple of elegance, told himself that Joe Foxworth's getup would have been frowned on even in the men's room of a third-rate West Side sa-

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loon. Cleaves had to remind himself that Joe Foxworth was a top operator in his field and essential to the moment.

Foxworth grinned. "There's a purpose in everything, Mr. Cleaves. Nobody will ever forget this God-awful getup, they will always associate it with me, so that when I choose to be 'not noticed' it becomes duck soup."

Cleaves' smile twitched the corners of his mouth. "I'm glad you told me —"

"I have a report for you," Foxworth said. He was all business now. He took a small notebook out of his pocket and turned to an early page. "His name is Jason Dark. He was born in Brooklyn Heights in 1923. His father was an accountant. His mother was private secretary to a big real estate operator. He went to public school, high school and somehow managed to get to Columbia University. His aim was law school. He flunked out in his second year."

Cleaves, his eyes turned away from Foxworth's immoral jacket, looked suddenly carved out of marble. "That surprises," he said. "I would have thought him far too clever to have flunked out of anywhere."

"Maybe he was late-blooming," Foxworth said. "Maybe it was because his father and mother both lost their jobs in the big crash of 1929. Jason Dark was trying to work his way through school and help support his parents at the same time. The load must have been too heavy." Foxworth turned a page, then two. "Never married. No history of womanizing — until very recently."

Cleaves turned to look at Foxworth, an eyebrow raised.

"About three months ago a very young woman, a real glamour chick, seems to have moved into his life."

"Go back a way," Cleaves said.

"He joined the Manhattan police force when he was twenty-three. Graduated from the Police Academy with very high ratings. Served for twenty-two years, rose to the rank of detective in the Homicide Division."

"His record?"

"Unexpectedly tough for what appears to be a round little man who looks more like a college professor than a cop. He was finally in trouble for being a little too quick with a gun. He retired from the police force and got himself licensed as a private eye. About a year ago he took a case that led him into our backyard. Somebody took care of him."

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"How?"

Foxworth moistened his lips. "He was beaten and tortured. His right hand was so badly mangled that it had to be amputated. He wears a plastic hand now, covered with a black glove. He has learned to do everything left-handed."

"But he didn't quit."

"He sure didn't quit," Foxworth said. "He stopped taking clients, but he didn't quit as far as Quandrant International is concerned. Six months ago he set a trap for Patrick Shane of Tyler & Shane, one of our outfits, one of our people. We had to erase Shane before he gave us away." Foxworth's eyes glittered. "That brings us to you, Mr. Cleaves. He's got you over a barrel for kidnaping Senator Stanton's child."

"We held her for less than an hour," Cleaves said. "We returned her unharmed. The Senator voted our way and we let the child go."

"But Dark knows it was you," Foxworth said. "You, the top lobbyist for Quadrant International in Washington. He's got to be gotten permanently out of our hair."

"How?"

"It's almost certain he's got records, tapes, God knows what else hidden away, to be sprung if something violent happens to him. It's got to look like an accident, impossible to connect to us."

"Can you manage it?"

Foxworth moistened his thin lips. "Give me a day or two," he said. "Meanwhile, Mr. Cleaves, stay virgin-pure."

Jason Dark looked at the little stack of travel folders on the table in front of him. A breeze from the open French windows that led to the little backyard garden of his East 40th Street apartment in the Murray Hill district fluttered the folders. Dark rested his black-gloved plastic hand on them. It served as an adequate paperweight and not much else, he thought.

Dark loved the room, its walls lined with books. Nothing bad had ever happened here. It had been a sanctuary after countless violences. It was the place where he had remade himself, psychologically and physically, after the terrible mutilation inflicted on him by an agent of Quadrant International. It was here that he had regained his balance, here that he had plotted his search-and-destroy mission against the top man in the giant multinational corporation and the corporation itself. He had only

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talked about his plan to one person, because anyone else would have laughed at the idea of one man fighting a corporation bigger and more powerful than two or three major countries put together. Quandrant International's power and influence was so great and so widespread that there was only one person Dark was certain, besides himself, couldn't be bought.

That one person came out of the kitchen carrying a steaming mug of black coffee laced with Irish whiskey. She was a young girl, blonde hair hanging loosely around her shoulders, blue eyes bright with a kind of eager involvement. Life was a perpetual excitement to Sharon Evans, particularly since she had started to live it with Jason Dark.

She put the mug down on the table beside him, within reach of his left hand. She ran her cool fingers through his sandy hair. He looked up at her through his faintly tinted wire-rimmed glasses with a kind of wonder. For the first time in his life he was not alone. He had argued the discrepancy in their ages, reminded her that he was old enough to be her father. He was not a romantic figure, not an eager young stud. And yet, by all that was holy, she loved him. It was a kind of late-in-life miracle.

"Are we planning a holiday, Jason?" she asked, looking down at the folders.

"We are planning a holiday for you," Jason Dark said.

"You've turned every day into a holiday, darling," she said, and bent down and kissed his cheek. Then she perched herself on the arm of his chair. "You're in one of your rare nonsensical moods. Holiday for me?"

He touched her face with his left hand. "You've made my life over, Sharon. You've made me stronger in many ways, but you've also made me vulnerable where I was never vulnerable before."

"I've taught you to love, and to enjoy loving," she said. "Is that bad?"

"That is beyond belief marvelous," he said, "but it also makes for weakness."

"Maybe we should get someone to prescribe the proper vitamins."

He went through a newly learned routine. Cigarette in his left-hand pocket, lighter in his left-hand pocket, the whole operation managed left-handed. "Let's be serious," he said.

She put her cheek against his for an instant. "Anything you say."

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His eyes narrowed against the smoke from his cigarette. "Carter Cleaves is holed up in a suite at the Beaumont. Washington is his beat but he's here in New York, waiting."

"For what, Jason?"

"Till his man can eliminate me as a nuisance."

"His man?"

"A foot soldier, you might call him, named Joseph Foxworth. Someone has said that the law is no more than a thin crust over a nest of soldier ants. Foxworth is a soldier ant. Death has become a big business in the world of big business. Foxworth deals in death. At the moment I'm his target."

"But since you know he's after you, aren't you one step ahead of him?"

"That brings us back to you, Sharon — my weakness."

"I don't understand."

"Suppose they should attack me through you? They could take you, hold you, harm you." He hesitated for a moment, looking down at the black glove on his plastic hand. "I'd back off, throw in the towel, throw in my weapons if you were threatened. That's my new weakness."

"Jason!"

"Hidden away, as you know, is an accumulated mass of evidence against Quadrant International. If anything suspicious happens to me it will be turned over to the proper authorities."

"You haven't told me where it's hidden."

"So that you could never be forced to tell. To get back to Foxworth, he won't shoot me from a rooftop or plant a bomb in my car. That would trigger my agent to release the evidence I have."

"Don't they want the evidence more than they want you?"

"They want both, and they'll try for both," Dark said. "But my death is going to have to look accidental. A traffic accident, a fall from someplace I would logically be, perhaps a simple street-alley mugging that could happen to anyone. I know Foxworth's history as an assassin. I would expect him not to think of you. I am his target. But Carter Cleaves? They pressured the Senator with a kidnaping. It might occur to him to get at me through you. So the vacation."

"No!"

"You will pack, I will wave goodbye to you at the airport. They'll see you go and forget any dreams they have about using you."

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"No."

"At the first stop you'll disembark and take the next flight back to New York. We'll arrange a place for you to stay when you return. Not here." He smiled at her. "Because I couldn't live if I didn't know where I could reach out and touch you."

"Jason, I love you."

"And of course I'd want you to be my chief mourner — if it should come to that."

The man with the black glasses sipped at a white crème de menthe, poured over crushed ice, with a brandy float. Carter Cleaves toyed with a glass of Perrier water with a twist of lemon. In his highly sensitive political job for Quandrant International, Cleaves rarely touched anything alcoholic. He had to be at the starting gate, around the clock, every day of his life. The two men were seated at a small table in a dark corner of the Blue Lagoon, a nightclub located off the lobby in the Hotel Beaumont. It was a table usually reserved for lovers or romantics. The man with the black glasses knew just how much to slip from his wallet to the captain stationed by the red-velvet rope at the entrance. The man with the black glasses knew just how much it would take to buy almost any man in the world. That was his special expertise.

"I'm glad you came by," Cleaves said to the man with the black glasses. "I'm a little concerned about our orders relating to Jason Dark."

"They come from the top," Black Glasses said, in an almost toneless voice.

"I'd like to understand why our approach to Dark has changed."

Black Glasses touched thin lips to his frosted drink. "In our world, Cleaves, we have to weigh the odds. Dark is a very dangerous and tenacious man." He lifted his glass and turned it round in the faint light.

"Why wasn't he simply eliminated in the first place?"

"He has some documents that he stole from our files. He managed to make some tape-recordings that would be disastrous if they were made public. We had to have those documents and tapes. We overpowered Dark in a restaurant that was run by people on our payroll. One of our men strapped his hand to the butcher's block in the kitchen when the place was deserted. He waited until it was deserted so that no one would hear." He moistened his lips as though what he was telling gave him sensuous

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pleasure. "First our man broke the bones in Dark's hand with the flat side of a meat cleaver. Then, when Dark wouldn't tell where the evidence was hidden, he chopped his hand to shreds with the blade of the cleaver."

Cleaves' fingers were unsteady as he fumbled with a cigarette. "Why didn't Dark turn over the evidence to the authorities when he was free?"

"There is a special and individual twist in every man's character," Black Glasses said. "We were prepared with counter publicity, with evidence to suggest that Dark's material was faked, but nothing happened. Dark's special twist of mind is to get even with the man at the top. He actually believes that he can bring down the temple single-handed. Each move he makes hurts us in some area. He almost got you in the Stanton case. We've got to stop him from chipping away at us."

"So the evidence will be made public. If I am to fight that in Washington I need to know —"

"Dark has a friend, a lawyer. His name is John C. Fenimore. He lives in an expensive suburb here in New York and spends more than he earns. He's in deep, almost critical financial difficulty."

"How do you know?"

"We've covered every acquaintance, friend and business client of Dark's. We have bought the sources of dozens of possible leaks. We are convinced that John Fenimore has the evidence, or knows where it is. The minute your man Foxworth finishes Dark, I will be in Fenimore's office. If Foxworth does a clean job and Fenimore thinks it's an unfortunate fatality unconnected with us, I think he can be bought. He will no longer have to worry about loyalty to his friend. When will Foxworth move?"

"He phoned me just before I joined you. He'll act tomorrow night. The exact time depends on Dark's movements."

The telephone on the bedside table in Jason Dark's apartment rang a little after midnight. He reached for it, aware of his loneliness. Sharon had left late that afternoon. He had seen her off at Kennedy Airport. He had kissed her goodbye and waved to her as she went through the gate and had watched Joe Foxworth watching him. Foxworth, he thought, must have sweat a little, wondering if Dark himself was about to take flight.

"Hello," Dark said into the phone.

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"Mr. Dark? Raoul here, at the Beaumont."

Raoul was the captain in the Blue Lagoon Room.

"You have news, Raoul?"

"Mr. Cleaves has just left here with his friend. I wasn't able to identify the friend."

"Damn!" Dark said.

"No one on the staff here and none of the security people knew him. But I do have the liqueur glass he drank from, in case there might be fingerprints —"

"Bless you, Raoul."

"I owe you," Raoul said. "This is part payment."

Jason Dark knew that the moment would not come in broad daylight. Foxworth was not a man to make his escape more difficult than need be. It would come after nightfall, probably tonight, Dark told himself.

There was never any way to make absolutely certain that you would win a battle. There was always the possibility of some unforeseeable miscalculation. He remembered his old Chief of Detectives saying, "Someone you count on stops off for a short beer and is two minutes' late — too late."

There was the chance of failure. Dark spent most of the afternoon writing two letters. One of them was addressed to Sharon Evans. It took time to write it, because Dark told her things about himself that he had never told anyone else, things he was proud of and things he was ashamed to remember. Most difficult of all was telling her how much he loved her, how much the short time they had been together meant to him. He had never tried to put love into words before. He wanted her to know what was in his heart — just in case.

If he was right about Foxworth she would never see the letter. But if he was wrong, if something hurried Foxworth, threw him off course —

The second letter was addressed to "John Smith" at a post office box at Grand Central. In it was the name of a bank and the number of a safety deposit box.

Late in the afternoon, with the sun setting hot in the west, Jason Dark dropped his two letters in the mailbox at the corner. He was not afraid, but he was ready for defeat.

Shortly after eight o'clock that evening Jason, wearing a rain-

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coat although there was no threat of rain, left his apartment and walked several blocks to a Longchamps restaurant. He ate a leisurely dinner of scallops and bacon and a green salad. He drank a glass of Chablis. He smoked two cigarettes with his coffee laced with Irish whiskey. The waitress watched him, fascinated by the way he handled everything with his left hand, and wondered about the black glove on the right hand he never used.

He paid his bill and went out onto the street a little after nine o'clock. He walked over to Third Avenue and paid his way into a movie theater. It was an X-rated sex movie, but it is doubtful that Dark saw any part of it. The only sign that he wasn't asleep was the frequency with which he glanced at the watch on his left wrist.

Shortly after eleven he started home to his apartment, both hands in the pockets of his raincoat. He paused once to look in a shop window. He was right. Foxworth had stopped two windows behind him. It would be quick when it came.

He walked slowly up the hill from Third Avenue toward his apartment. He was only four or five houses from his own when he felt Foxworth's gun in the small of his back.

"In the alley!" Foxworth said.

Jason Dark drew a deep breath and walked into the alley.

"Turn around," Foxworth said.

Jason turned. Foxworth stood almost against him, his gun pressed against Jason's breastbone.

"You idiot!" Foxworth said. "Before you die I wanted you to know who killed you and why."

"I was almost certain you would," Dark said.

A young boy who had seen the two men walk into the alley had, somehow, been certain that he was the witness to a mugging. Before he could decide what to do he heard the shots. Four shots. He ran for the corner, turned, and saw the mugger emerge from the alley. He found a policeman about a block away.

The news came over the radio and television networks in the early hours of the morning. "A man, identified as Jason Dark, aged fifty-two, was shot to death by a mugger only a few yards from his home on East 40th Street shortly before midnight last night. Dark's wallet was found beside his body, stripped of any money he might have been carrying. His driver's license helped the police to make an identification. Sergeant McClory of the 15th

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Precinct told reporters it looked like a simple mugging, possibly by some drug addict desperate to find the money for a fix.

In his room at the Beaumont Carter Cleaves turned off the television set. Foxworth had done a perfect job, he told himself. No clues, no eyewitness. A clean hit. Cleaves decided to break his rule and have a drink. He took a silver flask from his bureau drawer and swallowed some bourbon raw. He could feel his nerves, drawn taut all night, begin to relax.

Across town, in a side-street hotel, the man with the black glasses switched off the radio in his room. Tomorrow morning, he told himself, the game would be played out.

John C. Fenimore, attorney, stood up to greet the man who walked into his office. Mr. Lucien Mayfield wore heavy black glasses, and he had a wide, white, almost glittering smile.

"Thank you for seeing me," Mayfield said.

"Any friend of George Stevens, my old law professor," Fenimore said, and waved Mayfield to a green-leather armchair. "If I sounded reluctant when you called it's because I was upset by the unexpected death of a close friend."

Mayfield, his eyes hidden by the black lenses, made a church steeple out of his slender fingers. "Jason Dark," he said.

Fenimore, in his early fifties, looked ten years younger, suntanned, well-conditioned — he also looked surprised. "You knew Jason?" he asked.

"Of him, Mr. Fenimore, including the fact that he was your client. As a matter of fact, it's because of Jason Dark that I came to see you."

"Oh?"

"It will save us a great deal of time if we don't beat around the bush, Mr. Fenimore. I suspect your loyalty to your friend, while he was alive, would have been staunch and unassailable."

"I certainly hope so," Fenimore said.

"But now that he is no longer here, no longer has his own personal crusade to fight, I think you and I should face realities."

Fenimore reached for a cigarette in the box on his desk and lit it. "What sort of realities, Mr. Mayfield?"

"Global and personal," Mayfield said, the light from the window glittering against his black lenses. "We have watched old-fashioned diplomacy crumble in Indochina and the Middle East. Peace and war and economic stability are no longer determined

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by nations, by governments. Today's world is controlled by a few hundred multinational corporations. I represent one of the largest."

Fenimore's eyes were narrowed against his cigarette smoke. "Since you are interested in Jason Dark, that corporation must be Quadrant International."

"Quite right," Mayfield said. "Jason Dark had an obsession about Quadrant. He stole documents and tapes from us, threatened our destruction brick by brick. Ironic that he should have been killed by some ordinary street thug. Now those tapes and documents, made public, could damage our corporate image, but not destroy us. We know that you have access to those materials, Mr. Fenimore."

"If you're suggesting that I —"

Mayfield held up a silencing hand. "Let's not waste time, Mr. Fenimore. I know what your financial position is. I know that your home in the country is mortgaged to the hilt. I know that you're deeply in debt to banks and to friends. I'm prepared to make you an offer for those materials. Dark doesn't need them any more. You could, I suppose, sell them to our competition but we can and we will top any other offer. Your loyalty to Dark is no longer useful to him."

Fenimore leaned forward and crushed out his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk. "How much money are you talking about?"

The man with the black glasses smiled. This, as he had said, was his special expertise, guessing the price for treachery. Fenimore was too knowledgeable to listen to a chicken-feed bid.

"Let's begin by talking about half a million dollars," Mayfield said. "That will take care of your mortgage, your debts, and leave you rather handsomely well off."

"There is only one trouble with that offer," a voice said from the doorway behind Mayfield. "Jack's house isn't mortgaged and he hasn't got any debts."

Mayfield spun around in his chair, and seemed to freeze. Leaning against the door jamb, smiling very faintly, was Jason Dark.

"The trouble with unlimited power and wealth, my friend, is that you tend to underestimate how much can be done without it," Dark said. "You've got it all on tape, Jack?"

Fenimore nodded.

"So now, Mr. Gutzman, I will do the dealing," Dark said.

"My name is Lucien Mayfield," the man said.

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Your name is Adolph Gutzman," Dark said. "Former secret agent for the East German government until you joined Quadrant; expert at terror, highjacking, kidnaping. I have your fingerprints off a liqueur glass you used last night at the Beaumont. Interpol had no trouble giving you a name and a dossier."

"But you—" The man with the black glasses looked stunned. "You were supposed to have been killed last night."

"It was intended that I should be killed by your man Foxworth," Dark said. "You and your people are so sure of yourselves you grow careless. I fed Quadrant the phony reports on Jack Fenimore's finances. And last evening I wore a raincoat on a bright moonlit night. Foxworth didn't bother to wonder why."

Gutzman just stared.

"An old bulletproof vest I had from my days on the riot squad. A loose-fitting raincoat kept Foxworth from noticing I was unnaturally fat. I knew he wouldn't back-shoot me. He would have to have the satisfaction of letting me see who he was, wanting me to die thinking I had lost to Quadrant. We stood in the alley, an inch apart. He fired three shots into my protected gut. I fired one into his unprotected heart."

A trickle of sweat ran down Gutzman's face.

"I left my empty wallet beside him," Dark said. "I prepared Fenimore, here, for your visit this morning. Now, Mr. Gutzman, you have a choice. Or do you? I want the name of the man who gives you orders. If you give it to me your own people will have you killed. If you don't I will prefer charges against you for conspiring to commit murder." His mouth tightened. "But your people would probably find you in prison and kill you there, for having failed. It *isn't* much of a choice, is it, Mr. Gutzman?"

Sharon Evans sat on the couch in Jason Dark's living room, clinging to his arm as though she was afraid he might dematerialize. "It was all fine, Jason. I was back in the New York hotel room waiting to hear from you when the news came on television. They said you were dead — it was so real, so definite — oh, Jason!"

He stroked her cheek. "If I'd told you how I was going to play it you'd have insisted the risk was too great."

"But suppose you'd been wrong? Suppose he'd shot you in the back?"

"It wasn't as risky as I've made it sound. My friend, Sergeant

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McClory, wasn't ten yards away from me all evening."

"But the boy who saw Foxworth run out of the alley after the shooting?"

"He saw 'a mugger' run from the alley," Dark said. "That, of course, was me, not Foxworth."

She held him very close. "Jason, do you have to go on with this? Are you really any closer to your goal after running these risks?"

"Much closer. A study of Gutzman's schedule for the last few months will take me nearer to the top," Dark said.

"'Us' nearer to the top," Sharon said.

He smiled and touched his lips to the soft golden hair at the nape of her neck. "Us," he said. "Thank you for that, my sweet."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 441st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, a taut twisty story you'll find has something to say about good friendships and bad marriages, or good marriages and bad friendships . . .

Evelyn Groff Deuel has studied journalism through correspondence at the University of Oklahoma and submitted her first story to EQMM on the advice of her teacher. She has been a bookkeeper for a Sioux City, Iowa supermarket for more than 20 years and enjoys bowling, bicycling, playing the electric organ, and writing poetry and songs. Her song, "My Pa Is Allergic to Work," was published in 1949. . .

BEST-LAID PLANS

by EVELYN GROFF DEUEL

The stewardess had give the order to fasten seat belts when Adam Bray looked down from the plane window at the sprawling city and a smile of satisfaction crossed his lips. His fingers slipped once more into his jacket pocket and he took out the clipping from his hometown newspaper. He had read it a thousand times during the past two months and now he read it once more.

WOMAN DECLARED DEAD AFTER SEVEN-YEAR SEARCH

The seven-year search for the whereabouts of Mrs. Adam Bray, known to her friends and neighbors as Liddy, ended this week in the declaration of her death by the Bureau of Missing Persons and the Ideal Insurance Co. Mr. Bray reported his wife's absence on April 5, 1968, to Sheriff Myron Miggs after she had been missing from their home three days. Mr. Bray had believed his wife to be at the home of a friend, Mrs. Ann Segal, but when Mrs. Segal informed him that she had not seen Mrs. Bray, he reported her disappearance to Mr. Miggs, and in turn notified the

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Bureau of Missing Persons. A Bureau spokesman said he had worked on many cases, but that this one had offered absolutely no clues as to what had become of Mrs. Bray. Mr. Bray said that during the first five years of the search, he expected his wife to be found. After that, he felt it was in vain. Mr. Bray says he will sell his home, resign his job, and move to another city.

Adam folded the clipping and tucked it away as he thought again of that day when he had stood silently in the kitchen of their home and listened to his wife conversing at the front door with her best friend, Ann Segal. Adam had come in, covered with clay and damp with perspiration. It had been the last day of digging on their new cesspool and it had been stuffy at the bottom of the fifteen-foot hole. He had come to the top to winch up another load of dirt when he'd decided he needed a cold drink. But as he entered the kitchen, Ann's words had stopped him.

"Lydia Bray," Ann was saying, "you simply cannot mean it. You *couldn't* leave Adam. You *wouldn't* leave Adam."

"I'm leaving him, Ann, and that's final."

"But, Liddy, think what you are giving up! Look at this beautiful home. Think of the amount of money Adam will draw from his Share the Profits plan at the factory."

"I've thought of all that, believe me, and I've made up my mind," Liddy stated flatly.

"You're upset because Adam spends so much time on the house, Liddy. I can understand that. It seems to you that Adam is a slave, but think of the future, Liddy. Think how wonderful it will be to have this beautiful home and all that money."

Liddy gave a slight chuckle. "Sometimes there can be much more money, Ann, and a finer place to live than Hillcrest."

"You're just letting off steam, because the Browns spent the winter in Arizona and the Carters flew off to New York for two weeks. You'll get over it. Besides, leaving Adam won't solve anything. He'll just find you and bring you back home again. I can't picture Adam Bray without you."

"Oh, no. Adam won't ever bring me home. That's the one thing I'm positive of."

"You can't be positive of a thing like that, Liddy. Detectives have ways these days."

"You have absolutely no imagination at all," Lydia had said.

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean a person can't walk away, plain and simple. You have to have plans, Ann, explicit, foolproof plans. And I have them."

"Oh, come on, Liddy, we've been friends too many years for you to convince me that you could outsmart the big-city detectives Adam would hire to find you."

"If you weren't my best friend, and if I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have breathed a word of this to you. . ."

"And I've always trusted you too, Liddy, you know that. You're closer to me than a sister."

"Good. Then I'll tell you my plan."

Adam licked his lips, salty with sweat, and waited.

"First of all I am going to a large city. I won't tell you which city because I don't want you to feel guilty in case you're questioned by detectives or someone in authority. I'll go first to a used-car lot and purchase a car for cash. I'll ask the salesman to take me to the license bureau where I will take the driver's test and secure the license under my new name. That will take care of my new identity."

"Oh, Liddy, that won't change your fingerprints."

"My fingerprints have never been taken and before I leave I intend to wipe every door, drawer and handle in the house."

"Okay, go on," Ann said.

"Then I'll have my hair color changed, get contact lenses, and throw away these glasses. And then—this is the best part of all! I'm going to take off forty pounds."

"Sounds good, Liddy, it really does."

"And that isn't all, Ann. I am going to have my teeth straightened. I will no longer be fat, homely Liddy Bray. I'll be beautiful, slim, attractive, and have a new name."

"And how will you live, Liddy?"

"I'll go back to work at a job I've been training for by correspondence for four years."

"There's the flaw, Liddy. Adam will tell the authorities about that and the school will reveal your course and you'll be tracked down."

Lydia laughed. "Oh, no. I'm no fool. I didn't tell Adam I was taking the course. So you see, I have foolproof plans. Adam will never find me."

"I hope you're right, Lydia," Adam muttered to himself, going quietly back to the yard. "I only hope *nobody* ever finds you!"

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On the following Tuesday, Adam broke the seal to the basement drain and cemented the cesspool cover in place. That was the day Lydia Bray was first missing from their home.

He remembered now how he had waited three days to call Ann. Lydia was not there. He had then reported her disappearance to Sheriff Miggs, who spent two days questioning both Adam and Ann. It amazed Adam that Ann revealed not even the slightest part of Liddy's plan of escape. She was truly Liddy's confidante. And Adam, knowing what a great amount of insurance he would collect once Lydia was proven dead, proclaimed to know nothing of her whereabouts.

"We are landing at Buenos Aires in five minutes," the stewardess said, bringing Adam back to the present.

He checked his seat belt, feeling the nudge of his money belt beneath his clothing. $50,000 from Lydia's insurance, $55,000 from the sale of their home, $60,000 from his Share the Profits plan, and $35,000 from his sale of stocks and bonds.

It seemed an eternity until the plane taxied to a halt and the passengers were milling toward the exit.

Adam stood on the top step, his heart pounding with excitement as he scanned the crowd on the ground. At last a tall slim blonde removed her sunglasses and waved to him. Adam rushed down the steps and into her arms.

"Lydia, darling! Liddy," he cried. "Seven years was a lifetime without you!"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Kay Nolte Smith's first stories, "Reflected Glory" and "Theory of the Crime," were published back to back in our July 1974 issue. Both stories were academic in locale and tone. Her new story—actually her third but her second appearance in EQMM—leaves the academic scene, but is just as mental in its appeal, just as probing in its analysis of the mind and its hidden motives, and especially of its secret weapons . . .

THE SECRET WEAPON

by KAY NOLTE SMITH

How, Fred Lambert asked himself, was he going to kill his wife?

Within him there was a tremor at the thought of such a question, but his pale blue eyes gave no sign. Long ago he had trained his face not to give signs; now, even when he was alone, his large blunt features were as impassive as if he had carved them.

He was standing in the workshop he had built onto one side of the house, slowly feeding pine boards into the table saw, handling the wood with long slender fingers that contrasted oddly with his stocky build. A fine snow of sawdust had settled on his thick reddish hair and eyebrows, adding 20 years to his 45. The dust could be brushed away, but the network of weary lines around his eyes and mouth could not.

The blade shrilled into a fresh board and another wave of pine scent washed over him. It was so clean, he thought; it smelled of purity and space, not of small-town gossip and musty shelves and medicines, like the smell in his drug store. Except for the workshop, it seemed to him that no place in his life was free of the taint of sickness. Then he told himself that was unfair: Martha could not help her heart condition, and certainly she never complained about it. Sometimes he even thought it made her stronger emotionally.

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"We bear what we have to bear," she would say, carrying on with her charitable projects even after Dr. Hansen had advised a slower pace. "Your wife is a saint," Hansen had told him many times.

What kind of man, he asked himself, could be planning to kill a saint? The same kind, he answered dully, who could feel no response to her except for a weary indifference. He shook his head impatiently; what he was did not matter. Nothing mattered but Joanne. His eyes softened for a moment at the thought of his daughter.

A sudden breeze sent the wood chips swirling; the shop door had opened and Martha's thin figure was framed against the spring night. He switched off the saw.

"Oh, Fred," she said in the clear high voice that once had made him think of honey, "what are you working on?"

"New supply shelves for the drug store."

"Something practical? What a nice change." Her glance flicked to the carvings and wood mosaics that nearly covered one wall. "The noise is awfully loud, and old Mrs. Lyons is on her way over."

"What on earth for?"

"She's been so lonely since her daughter moved away and took the children. I told her to come visit me whenever she felt low. I wouldn't want the noise to disturb her."

"If you had let me buy soundproofing, you wouldn't hear any noise." Martha smiled but said nothing. She had thin, faintly bluish lips on which she never used makeup.

After a moment he said, "I'll work on something quieter."

"That would be so much nicer. Perhaps my headache will go away."

"Why didn't you say you had a headache?"

She was still smiling. "You know you hate to be bothered with my troubles."

He stared at the door she closed behind her, feeling the familiar mixture of helplessness and guilt. It was always like that, he thought; with a phrase and a smile, but never a reproach, she could summon all his years of neglecting her, of living so completely within himself that sometimes she seemed not to exist. He wondered what he would feel when she did not exist in fact, and asked himself again how he was going to do it.

At the drug store, he thought, stacking the pine boards, he was surrounded by tiny potential weapons, the drugs back in the

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pharmacy. Over the years he had picked up enough knowledge to use them; after hours, when the registered pharmacist was gone, he could prepare what was needed.

But even such weapons could be traced, he thought. If Hansen did an autopsy for some reason, the presence of anything unusual would be an arrow pointing to him—the husband who had means and opportunity. And motive, as everyone in Dennison knew. His neglect of Martha was a staple of local gossip.

He sat on the stool by the workbench. Light glinted on the tools on the pegboard—the saws, drills, files, rasps, chisels, and hammers. How ironic it would be, he thought, if the shop itself provided the weapon. He shivered and then took down a small wood chisel and a cherrywood bowl. Several ranks of carved birds swept up from its base; they did not seem to be made of the wood, but to be soaring beyond it. He began to chisel delicately on an unfinished wing.

Martha, he thought, had always known what the shop was—a way of keeping some fragment of his dream of being a sculptor. Never once had she asked him to give up the dream, but how could a man hold onto it if it was making his wife unhappy? All through the years in Chicago, when they lived hand to mouth while he went to art school, she had never complained; but her brave little smiles had struck him like knives.

"Why, Fred," she would say, "I don't expect you to think of me." It had made him think of her all the more, and when her father had the stroke and needed someone to manage the drug store, they had come back to Dennison. It was just for a while, they agreed; but her father had never recovered, and then Joanne was born, and every time he thought he might broach the subject, it seemed that Martha had another bad spell; and so the while had grown into forever.

When he finally accepted that fact, he had built the workshop. Gradually Martha had built something too: a wall of resistance. No, he thought, not a wall, but something soft and paralyzing, like fog.

"You're going to the shop again tonight?" she would ask when he rose from the supper table. "No, of course I don't mind. I know I've been sick too often to have learned how to be good company."

"You're buying another saw?" she would ask. "Oh, dear, I had hoped you would want to give that money to the hospital fund." Or to the church drive or the crusade for needy children, or what-

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ever worthy cause it was. Sometimes he did give her the money. More often he did not.

"I understand, Fred," she would say, smiling gently. "You're just not the kind of man who cares about other people's suffering."

Every hour and each dollar he spent on the shop came to seem a proof of his coldness of spirit and of the death of his love for her. He had wished for her sake that he could change, but all he'd been able to do was accept the guilt of hurting her.

There was a knock at the door, three short and one long. "Come in, Joanne," he called.

When she was a child, playing in the shop and begging him to carve her still another puppet or doll, he had thought of her as an angel in a Renaissance choir, plump and mischievous and serene; but now at 17 her body had lengthened into a woman's lines and he wished for a Raphael to paint her. Now she stood behind him, watching the wing of the bird come closer into life. "It's a lovely bowl, Dad. Who is it for?"

"Just for me, I guess." He felt her fingers brushing sawdust from his hair.

"Dad," she said abruptly, "I've made up my mind. I'm not going to art school."

With an effort he kept working on the wing. "Why not?"

"I just can't do that to Mother. We talked about it again this morning and she keeps saying I should go if I want to, but she gets that funny hurt look on her face. I mean how would I feel, away in New York, knowing she hated it? I'd feel guilty all the time."

"I know," he said quietly.

"Besides, Dr. Hansen is always saying she shouldn't have shocks or get upset about things. What if she gets so upset when I go that I—that it—kills her?"

If only it would, he thought, and cursed himself for wishing it even for a moment. That burden was his to bear, not Joanne's.

"I can go to teachers' college right over in Rockland. That probably is more practical, like she says. And I know that's what she wants, even if she won't come right out and admit it. So I guess that's what I have to do."

"Joanne," he said when he could trust his voice again, "you are going to study in New York this fall. I promised you that, and it's going to happen. Don't worry, now. I'm taking care of it."

"Oh, Daddy, thank you." He felt her soft wet cheek against his.

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When she left, he sat staring. In the workbench light his hands seemed suddenly huge and powerful; he flexed them and then shuddered. "There are weapons everywhere," he whispered to himself. "If only I can find the right one, and then have the courage to use it."

He bent again to the cherrywood bowl and put the last touches on the wing, so that the bird was able finally to fly.

When Martha Lambert died three months later, the town of Dennison gave her a splendid funeral.

Mrs. Davis said the eulogy was the most moving she had ever heard. Mrs. Johnson said that such a good woman deserved all those tributes and flowers. Mrs. Weston called it a blessing that Fred had been so good to her during her last months. Mrs. Baldwin hoped that was a comfort to him now, but Mrs. Parker thought he looked troubled.

He was.

Throughout the long day of the funeral he had been driven by the need to destroy the evidence—an irrational feeling, he knew, for who could possibly suspect? But when the last of the neighbors left, he slipped gratefully out to the workshop.

He went to a can of Number Ten nails and fished something from the bottom. It was a tiny metal box with pills inside.

He took it to the workbench and sat down heavily. Now, in the quiet and the wood scents, he was ready to face what had happened, from the beginning to the dreadful end, and to decide what he was to feel.

It had taken him a week to prepare the pills, extracting digitalis from commercially made pills and then, with the old tablet mold he dug out of the drug-store cellar, pressing out six new pills. They looked as small and white and innocent as the ones Martha took regularly, but each contained enough digitalis for a lethal overdose.

At the end of April he had launched the first part of his plan. He had taken the cherrywood bowl into the kitchen where Martha was mixing a cake for a charity bazaar.

"How nice," she had said without looking at it. "You're fortunate to have time to waste on making things people don't need."

"I thought there might be a need for this one. I'd like to donate it to your bazaar. It might bring a good price."

Her spoon had missed a beat in the mixing bowl, and then she

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smiled. "Fred, you'd never give up your treasures just to do a little good in the world. You're not that kind of person, are you?"

"Don't you want the bowl?"

He had not been able to identify the look in her eyes. "Yes," she said curtly, "I'll take it."

The next afternoon he had offered to help set up for the bazaar. While he arranged tables and hung lights in the old grade-school gym, she had moved among her friends, smiling, sending comments floating back to him. "Fred had an attack of conscience last night, but it won't last the day." "Of course Fred finds this all very boring. He'd rather be in his workshop." He had been puzzled; her manner and smile were sharp, which was unlike her. Perhaps, he had thought, she did not trust herself to believe in his new conduct, for which he could hardly blame her.

From that day he had accompanied her to meetings and affairs, gone to church with her and stayed with her in the evening if she were home. One night while they were watching television, she demanded abruptly, "Why are you doing all this?"

"All what?"

"Spending so much time with me. Why haven't you been in the workshop all week?"

"Because I want to be with you." Even in his own ears the words had sounded unconvincing. He had had a strange desire to tell her the truth, to say: I'm turning over a new leaf so no one can possibly suspect anything when I kill you. Instead he had added woodenly, "I want to make up for the fact that I haven't been much of a husband."

"You certainly haven't," she shot back. "And it's not the kind of thing you can make up."

Increasingly her behavior had puzzled him. He had expected his attentiveness to please her—had even hoped it would constitute a small atonement—but instead there were constant sharp edges in her voice, like bits of broken glass in honey, and her smile was acquiring the jerky quality of a reflex. Several times she had spells of breathlessness that made Dr. Hansen frown.

Stupidly, it had taken him weeks to understand her growing agitation: she must suspect that he was planning to kill her. The thought had made him sick; he had no desire to torture her. But he could see no way to turn back. To revert to his old behavior would be unspeakably cruel—even crueller, perhaps, than the pills he was waiting to use. Heavily aware of the irony, he had

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tried even harder to make Martha believe in his new conduct.

Joanne had believed readily. "Dad," she said to him one day, shyly, "I know why you're being so sweet to her. I can't believe it'll really change her feelings about art school, but I do love you for trying." He had nodded impassively, unable to speak.

In June he had given Martha a diamond ring for their twentieth wedding anniversary. The box was waiting on her plate at breakfast, and when she opened it he was certain the flicker in her eyes was fear. "I don't like expensive gifts," she had said.

"But this is a special occasion. And it's money that would only have gone into the shop. I'd been saving it to buy a thickness planer."

Her face had gone as white as the satin in the box. If Joanne had not been there, he was sure she would have refused the ring.

Several days later she was in bed, coughing and breathing in wheezes. When she felt better he went to sit with her; almost at once she began to make guarded references to the time, ten years before, when he had spent many evenings building a stereo unit for the new music teacher at the high school.

He had felt a surge of guilt, for the hours with the woman had been dangerously happy ones, but he had tried to reassure Martha.

"I don't believe you." Her voice had drilled into him with the hardness of the diamond she was twisting on her finger. "I know you'd rather be with a woman like that than with a sick creature like me. But I understand. I always have. And if you want to give me a diamond ring, why, fine. I'll wear it, if it eases your conscience."

He had been certain in that moment that if he lied to her—if he said there had been an affair—she would have relaxed. Instead he had told her the literal truth: "You're the only woman I ever loved." The veins in her neck had seemed to stand out even more, in protest. He had left the room wondering if possibly she *wanted* to be hurt, and why.

Over the weeks, while he fixed her meals, brought her flowers and sat with her, the news of his conduct spread throughout Dennison just as he had hoped. The faces of customers in the drug store were thawing into smiles; but Martha had stopped smiling altogether. He had given up hoping to make her believe him; he simply wanted it all to be over, for her sake as much as for his.

At the end of July, when Hansen's care had made her well

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enough to be up for over a week, he had decided it was time to offer Dennison his final proof. He had sent Joanne off with her friends one night; over Martha's protests he prepared the dinner himself and set it in the dining room, on the inlaid table which had taken him over a year to make.

She had eaten slowly and cautiously, barely responding to his talk of business at the store. Then he had brought up the recent crippling accident to one of the local men. "I suppose you'll want to help out his family?" he had asked.

"Yes, of course." Her voice had been flat.

"I knew you would. So this is a good time to tell you that from now on there will be more money for things like that."

"What do you mean?" Her head had lifted warily.

He had laid the weekly Dennison paper on the table. "I've put in an ad to sell the equipment. I'm giving up the workshop."

Her fork had clattered on the plate, sending peas rolling frantically on the placemat and over the wood. "No! You can't do that!"

She knows, he had thought numbly, she knows I'm getting ready for the end, for her end. But all he said was, "I thought it would please you."

"You don't care what pleases me. You never have."

"But surely you want me to give up the shop?"

She had looked at him as if she wanted to scream instead of to answer. "I won't let you do it."

"But it's for your sake," he had said, almost choking on the words.

"Stop saying that! I don't want you doing things for my sake, I don't want any more of it."

"But . . . why not?"

Her eyes had twisted away from his. "Just leave me alone."

He had felt helpless to deal with her sudden intransigence. "The ad is already in the paper," he said foolishly. "Everybody will see it."

"And that's what you want, isn't it? You want to show the whole town that you've changed. Don't stare at me like that. Did you think I didn't know what you were doing?"

"And what was I . . . doing?"

"Trying to make a show of your reformation. Well, maybe the town is taken in by it, but I'm not! I see what you really are, you know. I'll see it tomorrow and next week and next year and as long as you live."

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He had felt a prickle of cold across the back of his neck. Did she not, after all, suspect that he was going to kill her? But then what had been weakening and frightening her all these weeks?

Her voice had raced on eagerly. "You'll never change, underneath. You *can't* change. I know it, and so do you."

"Martha, why is it so important to you to keep painting me as evil?"

"Because that's what you are! Don't forget what I've had to put up with from you. And now from Joanne too. All she can think of is getting away. Just like you. You wanted to get away years ago, I know that. And you would have done it, too, if I hadn't—" She had stopped abruptly and begun spearing up peas from the table with her fork. "Leave me alone."

He had taken a deep breath and begun the speech he had rehearsed. "I know you don't believe that I want to do things for your sake, Martha, and I guess I can't blame you for that. But will you believe that if I give up the shop it will make *me* feel better? To know that I'm doing the things you want is a . . . great relief to me."

He had looked up expecting to see in her eyes contempt for his hypocrisy, and had seen instead that she finally believed him. And that she was terrified.

His words had continued mechanically while his mind grappled with the shock. "You see, Martha, I've always felt guilty about the shop, and so—"

"I know you have. I know you have!"

"And so I'd be giving it up partly for *my* sake—"

"I won't let you do it! No!"

Then his mind had given him words that were new. "Martha, do you *want* me to feel guilty?"

With the force of a blow he suddenly had felt the weight of all his years with her, the years of gentle, honeyed accusations that had drilled away at everything he felt and did and was, that had fed on his genuine remorse and swelled it into a huge crushing ball of guilt.

"*That's* what you've been afraid of," he had whispered.

"No!"

"You're afraid that I won't feel guilty any more."

"No!"

"But why, Martha, why?" he had asked helplessly. "Don't you know I loved you? At the beginning I really did love you."

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"No! I won't believe you! You never loved me, no one could ever love me, I could *never* make people love me."

"So you tried to hold us . . . with guilt?"

"All of you, thinking of nothing but yourselves, of your precious art and your workshop and anything and everything except me. But I made you think of me anyway, didn't I? I made you hate yourself because of me."

"Martha, you can't know what you're saying."

"Don't look at me like that!" Her voice had been as shrill and jagged as a saw. "I didn't do anything. I only wanted you to know what it is to suffer."

"You want people to . . . suffer? My God, Martha, why?"

She did not answer; but as if it moved against her will, her fork had raked across the inlay in the table, leaving four thin white gashes.

"What kind of woman are you?" he had cried.

Suddenly the air in the room had seemed too thin for her. "I didn't mean that," she had gasped, "I don't feel that, I'm not that kind of person. I don't hate anyone!"

Then she had called for her pills.

And he had gone to get them.

The attack had been severe and two days later she was dead . . .

He shook his head slowly and painfully; after a while the workshop came back into focus.

Must he now call himself a murderer? That, he realized, was the question which had brought him here.

He stared down at the box in his hands, the incontrovertible evidence that he had planned for her to die.

Yet all along, he thought, she had been the one who had the weapon: guilt. All he had done, unwittingly, was to take it away from her.

But what that finally had revealed about her, and what the revelation had done to her . . . It would almost be easier, he thought, to believe that he had gone to fetch the pills.

As if to reassure himself, he opened the box. All six of the pills were still there. He dropped them on the concrete floor and crushed them under his heel.

As slowly as the first rough strokes of a carving, a smile began to grow on his face. A murderer would surely feel guilt, he thought. But guilt, he realized wonderingly, was something that he felt no longer.

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a NEW short story by

JON L. BREEN

In some versions of "My First Meeting with Sherlock Holmes" (also titled "Who Shall Ever Forget?") we commented on children's books: "As a boy my reading habits were pure and innocent. I confess now that I never read a Nick Carter until I was past voting age. My literary childhood consisted of Horatio Alger, Tom Swift, the Viking legends, the multicolored Lang fairy books, Frank Merriwell, Baseball Joe, the Rover Boys, Tarzan, The Three Musketeers, Jules Verne, Peck's Bad Boy, and—yes, the Oz stories. I can reread the Oz books today—and I often do."

Yes, the Oz stories. In some ways they provided the greatest stimulation to my boyhood imagination. It is impossible for me now—more than half a century after I first visited the Land of Oz in print—to calculate how much influence the original Oz books by L. Frank Baum had on EQ's creativity.

Yes, the Oz stories . . . for years I've wanted to publish a detective story set in the Emerald City, and for years I've suggested to Jon L. Breen such a pastiche possibility. Mr. Breen is without doubt our foremost pastichist-parodist, and at last he has gratified my wish. Here is a tale of crime and detection in Oz, with the Wonderful Wizard himself the sleuth, or rather, in the Ozian tradition of the Wizard's humbuggery, the apparent sleuth . . .

Take a journey with us—back into time—back to your childhood—back to the glory that was Glinda and the grandeur that was Baum—back to one of the pleasures of the lovely past. . . .

"Q"

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THE FLYING THIEF OF OZ

by JON L. BREEN

On the vast gray plains of Kansas, one day was much like the next, and the next was much like the one following. And although a little girl named Dorothy Gale was basically happy and contented on her Uncle Henry's farm, she had seen enough other places and done enough exciting things so that her heart leaped at every chance for some new experience.

Thus, the day the flying machine landed in her uncle's field, she was thrilled at the prospect of a ride, though Uncle Henry and Auntie Em were far too concerned about the fate of their crops to appreciate the situation's possibilities.

The flyer, a thin male of medium height who proved quite handsome when he removed his goggles and muffler, was all apologies. "I am Clarence Mennen, at your service, sir, better known on the aviation circuit as the Magnificent Mennen. I want you to know that I sincerely regret any damage I may have done to your crops and will make it up to you, as soon as I have the money."

Uncle Henry snorted and scowled but Auntie Em proved more hospitable. "Accidents will happen, Mr. Mennen," she said. "You must join us for some dinner. You must be hungry."

"It was not completely an accident, madam," said the pilot later over a plain but appetizing meal in the farmhouse. "As I flew overhead, I could not help noticing that the large flat portion of your property makes an excellent natural airfield. I thought that with your permission I could offer rides to your neighbors for a nominal sum, and by giving you a percentage of what I make I could pay you for the use of the field and for any damage I may have inadvertently caused."

"What?" Uncle Henry exclaimed. "Go up and down, up and down all day long in that terrible machine? You've done enough damage already."

"I usually land much better than that," said the pilot ruefully. "I have just returned from the Dominguez Field Air Meet in California, from which I made many flights and performed many daring stunts without a single accident."

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"Neighbors are few and far between here," Uncle Henry said. "And those that are here are sensible folks. You'd have few takers."

"I would need to do some advertising in the nearby towns, of course, to attract potential customers."

"And you'll terrify my livestock."

"Not once they get used to it. The first experience is the terrifying one, and that is now past."

Uncle Henry looked troubled. He didn't really like the idea, but times were hard on the farm and a little extra money would be welcome. So reluctantly he agreed to the plan.

The Magnificent Mennen was looking at Dorothy, who regarded him with bright and eager eyes. He said, "Perhaps the young lady would like to take a short spin with me. Free of charge, of course."

"Oh, no," said Uncle Henry quickly. "I could not allow that!"

"Please, Uncle Henry," Dorothy pleaded. "I'm not afraid."

"I should be terrified," Auntie Em said. "I could not look."

"You wouldn't let the neighbor kids go up from here if you didn't think it was safe enough for me, would you?" Dorothy asked reasonably.

The Magnificent Mennen wasn't at all sure that this point would help his cause, but it seemed to win over Uncle Henry, who obviously found it difficult to deny his winsome niece anything she asked.

"Have you been flying long?" Uncle Henry asked.

"Over a year. It's a hard business to break into successfully. At the air show I spent days following around two brothers I thought could help me get established. However," he added with a sigh, "it turned out they weren't the right brothers."

"That's too bad. What would you need to get you on the right track?"

He laughed. "Money, of course. I have lots of good ideas, but I don't have the money to put them into practice. I sometimes think I'd do anything for it."

"I can see that," said Uncle Henry. To him, going aloft in a flying machine fell into the category of "doing anything."

Later as they walked from the farmhouse to the plane, Dorothy told the aviator, "I think it's a shame people have to worry so much about money. I have been to a place where there is no money and people share everything and live happily and peacefully with each other."

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"Sounds great," said the pilot unbelievingly. "What's the name of this place and how do I get there?"

"It's called the Land of Oz, but I can't tell you how to get there. I got taken there once by a tornado, but there's none coming at the moment." When she mentioned the Emerald City with its great treasure houses of emeralds, diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems, the aviator's attention seemed especially keen.

The Magnificent Mennen moved an unusual-looking tank-shaped contrivance from the passenger seat as he helped Dorothy into the flying machine. "Oh, I forgot to tell you," he said. "I'm also the representative for the Middle West of the Dustgulper Vacuum Cleaner Company, and that's my sample. I may try to peddle a few to some of my lady passengers, but please don't tell your Uncle Henry. It may be a touch too commercial for him."

"Oh, I don't think Uncle Henry will be put off by a little salesmanship of — what did you call it? A what cleaner?"

"Vacuum cleaner. Fellow patented them back in 1899 and they're just now starting to catch on. Most handy home device, but I'll give you my sales pitch later. Hang on. I'm going to fly high today, higher than ever before!"

As the flying machine took off, Dorothy could see little but dust. Soon, however, she looked down and saw the patchwork patterns of the fields and farms far below her. The pilot circled and as he did so went higher and higher, and higher, until he flew straight into a billowy white cloud. The little plane jerked and jumped in the air, and for the first time Dorothy was frightened. The pilot was shouting something, but with the noise of the engine, she couldn't understand what he was saying.

The plane came out of the cloud and now, far below, the ground was green and lush and beautiful. It looked nothing at all like Kansas.

The pilot shouted, "Where are we? Is this Oz?"

Dorothy nodded. Much as she loved Oz, Dorothy wished she had been able to tell Auntie Em and Uncle Henry she was going. They did worry so when she went off on one of her mysterious journeys, and they never believed the stories she told when she came back.

The pilot was circling the lush countryside looking for a place to land, but his search was less fruitful than it had been on the flat plains of Kansas. Finally he pointed to a stretch of yellow brick road. "I'll try to land there!"

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"All right!" Dorothy shouted back, though she didn't see that her opinion carried much weight.

She watched the yellow bricks come closer and closer until the flying machine made a landing even rougher than it had made on her Uncle Henry's field. As it touched down with a jolt, Dorothy hit her head on a part of the plane and was momentarily stunned.

Moments later, as she began to regain consciousness, she heard voices, first faint as if far in the distance, then louder.

"What is it, Professor? What can this strange object be?"

"I can only surmise it is some sort of flying machine," said a second voice. Dorothy thought it sounded familiar. "I surely have never seen anything like it in Oz."

"Do they have such things in your country, sir?"

"I have heard that they do, but I have never seen one. Certainly they were not in common use when I left. Travel by balloon somehow seems safer."

Now Dorothy knew who it was. She lifted her head rather painfully and pulled herself up out of the seat. She found herself looking into the surprised face of the Wizard of Oz.

"Why, it's little Dorothy!" he cried delightedly. "Did you drive this strange machine here?"

"Why, no. It was Mr. Mennen — the Magnificent Mennen. Where has he gone? He took his vacuum cleaner."

"His what?"

"His vacuum cleaner."

"Then he must also have taken his vacuum. For whatever a vacuum is, we have nothing like it in Oz, and therefore to have need of a vacuum cleaner, this gentleman must also be carrying a vacuum."

"You are as silly as ever, oh, Oz the Great and Terrible," said Dorothy, "but I am very pleased to see you." She hugged him and planted a kiss on his bald and shiny head.

"The Scarecrow used to have a vacuum," the Wizard continued.

"Oh, did he?"

"Indeed. He carried it in his head until I granted him a brain. Well, well, we must find where your flying machine friend has gone. What was he called?"

"The Magnificent Mennen."

"Sounds like a brother humbug. We had better watch him."

For several days Dorothy was a guest in the amazing and beautiful Emerald City, where all the buildings were made of pre-

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cious stones and everything and everybody was green. The Wizard of Oz (previously known as Oscar Zoroaster Phadrig Isaac Norman Henkle Emmannuel Ambrose Diggs of Omaha, Nebraska) still lived here and retained his title, but he no longer ruled. While Dorothy was renewing her friendship with the current sovereign, the Princes Ozma of Oz, and with Nick Chopper the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion, and the Scarecrow, and all her other friends, the Wizard was using all his considerable skill, augmented by his even more considerable humbuggery, to find out what had become of the missing aviator, the Magnificent Mennen.

But no one among the Munchkins, Winkies, Quadlings, and Gillikins, the four different peoples who inhabit the Land of Oz, which was now politically united under Ozma's enlightened leadership, had seen the pilot.

The Wizard was frankly worried. Ever since Dorothy had told him of the aviator's interest in the great royal treasure rooms in the Emerald City, the Wizard had feared a possible robbery and had doubled the guard.

"Why do you worry so?" Princess Ozma asked. "There is no crime in Oz."

"You are forgetting that just last year we had a murder trial?"

"Yes," Ozma replied, "of Eureka the Kitten for eating my piglet."

"But Eureka was innocent," retorted Dorothy. "There was no murder and the piglet was quite safe."

"True, true," the Wizard agreed. "Nevertheless, my dear, your aviator is an outsider and does not understand the ways of Oz. And when I lived in the United States, I saw many evil deeds committed by inhabitants of that land which, by now, seems much stranger and more foreign to me than Oz. And in my days in carnivals and circuses, I surely learned never to trust anyone with a moniker like the Magnificent Mennen."

Finally a clue developed. H. M. Woggle-Bug, T.E., Dean of the Royal College of Athletic Science, reported that the librarian of the Temple of Learning, Ozbert Pentstone, had seen a stranger shortly after his arrival and had given him a pill. It must be explained here that all efforts by Ozians of college age were devoted to intercollegiate sports, and all academic subjects were taught by the ingestion of Knowledge Pills. Thus, librarians in Oz needed two degrees, one in library science and one in pharmacy.

"What was the subject of the pill?" the Wizard asked.

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"The Complete and Total History and Georgraphy of Oz."

"Then after taking it, he'll know everything there is to know about this land and everyone in it, making it all the easier for him to hatch some nefarious plot to steal the royal jewels. Why did the librarian give him the pill — didn't he realize it could be dangerous?"

"I asked that and he gave me a long and stern lecture on intellectual freedom."

"I've always been suspicious of that fellow," said the Wizard.

The Wizard's worst fears were realized. That same afternoon the chief guard of the royal storehouses of Oz rushed to the Throne Room to report a terrible theft to Princess Ozma.

"Your Highness, hundreds and hundreds of precious gems have been stolen from the royal treasurehouse," the breathless guard cried.

"It is impossible," the Princess retorted, consternation clouding her lovely features. "Have not your guards been on duty all day and all night?"

"Yes, Your Highness, and I would trust every one of them with my life. I assure you no one entered or left by the big door."

"But is that not the only entrance to the main storeroom?"

"It is."

"Then I was correct and the theft *is* impossible." She turned to the Wizard. "Could we have another wicked Witch in our midst, Wizard?"

"I hope not," said the Wizard fervently, for his sideshow magic seemed feeble indeed compared with that of a genuine Witch. "I shall investigate."

"We must call in Glinda the Good," Princess Ozma reflected.

"Please, not yet, Your Highness. I am official Wizard here, and I beg to be allowed to complete my investigation before outside help is called in. Surely I must do something to earn the fruits of Your Highness's generosity in allowing me a suite in the palace."

"Very well, but if the mystery is not solved by nightfall, professional help will be needed."

"Professional, madam? Who is more professional than the Wonderful Wizard of Oz?"

Dorothy, who had been listening to their conversation with rapt attention, could not resist putting in, "Professional humbug."

The Wizard, not offended by this characterization, replied, "That may be all that is required."

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Investigation revealed only one other possible means of entrance to the royal storeroom — a narrow air vent on the back wall of the room. It opened out into a cul-de-sac alleyway just around the corner from the busy Emerald City Central Market, which was crowded all day with shoppers purchasing green carrots, green potatoes, green oranges, and even green eggplants.

The Wizard looked around him. "A person could work here unobserved — no one ever comes into this alleyway. And I have alerted several of the merchants to watch the entrance to this cul-de-sac and note any suspicious-looking persons entering it."

"You seem to have thought of everything," Dorothy said.

"But not enough, apparently," said the Wizard ruefully. "Still, no one, not even the tiniest of Munchkins, could get into the storeroom through this air vent. I can just barely get my arm through it, but not far enough to reach any of the bins containing the jewels. Dorothy, I am totally baffled as to how this crime was committed."

He sighed. "We simply are not used to this sort of thing in Oz. No one here would want to steal the precious gems, because they are of no practical use to anyone here. But if your pilot friend —"

"I don't think I shall call him my friend if he proves to be a thief," Dorothy said worriedly.

"If the Magnificent Mennen can get even a handful of emeralds and rubies back to our world, Dorothy, his fortune will be made. Well, to work! Our next step will be to find out from my merchant-spies who entered this cul-de-sac this afternoon and then to interview all the suspects in the Throne Room. If nothing comes of that, I can only think there has been some collaboration by one of the main door's guards. I would hate to believe that!"

Dorothy thought the Wizard had never looked sadder than at the moment he confronted his three suspects in the Throne Room, with the Princess Ozma presiding. For the only three persons who had entered the cul-de-sac were three of the most respected citizens of Oz, and ordinarily no one would be more above suspicion.

"Of course, I had nothing to do with it," said Nick Chopper the Tin Woodman. "And it breaks my heart to think you would suspect me."

"What was that large and mysterious-looking bag that the merchants saw you wheeling in front of you into the cul-de-sac?" The Wizard asked.

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"It was my golf bag," the Tin Woodman responded.

"Golf bag?" said Dorothy. "I didn't know people play golf in Oz."

"We play everything you can think of in Oz. Why not golf? Of course, the Emerald City Links is an especially nice place to play — since everything is green, even the sand traps, no matter how bad your shot is, you always get it on the green."

"That golf bag would be a good place to conceal stolen gems," said the Wizard.

The Tin Woodman nonchalantly applied the oil can to his left elbow. "Nonsense. I do think I'll give up golf, though. I develop a bad hitch in my backswing if I don't oil myself after every hole."

"And with the price of oil what it is—" laughed the Scarecrow.

The Wizard's usually merry face, trying to look severe, turned to his second suspect. "You don't seem to be taking this too seriously, Scarecrow."

The Scarecrow looked at the Wizard through identical round eyes painted on his burlap head. "Well, I didn't do it, and I know my friends didn't either. It would be silly for us to steal all those jewels. You don't suspect me, do you, Dorothy?"

"I don't see how I can," the little girl said with a puzzled frown. "But still, only the three of you went into the cul-de-sac."

"So what! So what!" the Cowardly Lion retorted belligerently. "So what if we did! None of us could reach in and get anything out through that tiny little air vent!"

"That's true," said the Wizard. "But I think I might know a way . . . You also had a golf bag with you today, didn't you?"

"What of it? I was going to play golf with the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow. What of it? I'm giving up golf anyway."

"Why?"

"It frightens me."

"Why?"

"It's so dangerous. I don't like dangerous sports."

"Hm. I understand why all three of you were wheeling golf bags. But what were you doing in the cul-de-sac?"

"We agreed to meet there and then go to the golf course," said the Tin Woodman.

"But you were all there at different times," said the Wizard.

"We were to meet at two o'clock," said the Tin Woodman.

"No, no, we were to meet at two thirty," said the Scarecrow.

"No, you're wrong, it was at three o'clock we were supposed to meet," said the Cowardly Lion.

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"Well, now I understand one thing," said the Scarecrow.

"What's that?"

"Why we're standing here and not playing golf. If you fellows had got the meeting time right, we would have met in the cul-de-sac, gone on to play golf, and no one would be accusing us of robbery!"

"But the correct time was two o'clock," said the Tin Woodman.

"It was three o'clock," said the Cowardly Lion. "Aw, whose idea was it to play golf anyway?"

"It was the Scarecrow's," said the Tin Woodman.

"No, it was the Cowardly Lion's," said the Scarecrow.

"Mine? Mine? I would never suggest such a thing. It must have been Nick Chopper's idea."

"This," announced the Wizard of Oz, "is getting us nowhere. And slowly at that."

Dorothy tugged at the Wizard's sleeve and whispered something in his ear. His eyes lit up and he regarded his three suspects with new suspicion. "Of course, I ought to have known!" he exclaimed. "I now know who, and I *think* I know how."

"Who is the thief?" asked the Tin Woodman in a shaking voice. "Is it one of us?"

"I have been sure as I could be from the start that the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion are all above suspicion. But there is one further possibility — that one of the three of you is an impostor, the Magnificent Mennen in disguise, waiting for a chance to escape. And thanks to Dorothy I know which one it is."

The three suspects looked at one another.

"We must all stay together until the guilty one is revealed," said the Cowardly Lion.

"Yes," said the Scarecrow, "so that the guilty one has no chance to escape."

"But, Wizard," said Dorothy, "I still do not understand how the jewels were stolen from the royal storeroom."

The Wizard had been distractedly looking toward the door of the Throne Room, as if for an actor who was late for his cue.

Suddenly into the room burst one of the palace guards.

"We found it, Wizard," the guard cried. He was carrying a machine that Dorothy recognized as the Magnificent Mennen's sample Dustgulper Vacuum Cleaner. The Wizard leaped upon it, opened it up, and removed its bag. He shook it and shook it, but

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nothing fell out except some oddly colored thin pieces of wood. Soon a pile of these lay on the floor of the Throne Room, but there was nothing else inside the vacuum bag.

"I am disappointed," the Wizard said. "The Magnificent Mennen must have had an opportunity to remove the gems and hide them elsewhere. Still, I believe this little machine is the answer to our locked-storeroom mystery. You will observe it is of a size easily concealed in one of our friends' golf bags. I shall proceed to demonstrate how the crime was accomplished."

He beckoned Dorothy, the Princess Ozma, and the three suspects to follow him.

At first the Scarecrow hung back. "I don't want to come," he said. "That machine frightens me. I'm afraid it would eat up my straw."

"It's not like you to be frightened," said Dorothy.

"No, but it's like me, and I prefer to stay here with the Scarecrow," the Cowardly Lion said, his mane quivering.

"No, you don't," said the Tin Woodman. "We said we'd all stick together until we knew which of us is the impostor, and besides, I want to see how this works."

"Since there is no electricity in Oz, we shall need your enchanted extension cord, Your Highness," said the Wizard.

Princess Ozma sent a servant girl to the place where the enchanted extension was kept, but the maid returned to say it was missing.

"Could this be it?" the guard asked. "I found it with the mysterious device."

"Excellent! Excellent!" cried the Wizard. "Now I know I am right. Follow me."

The group followed him to the air vent outside the royal storehouse. He put the end of the long tube attached to the cleaner into the opening, plugged the electric cord on the vacuum into the enchanted extension cord, and switched on the machine. It made a loud whirring noise that caused great quivering and fear on the part of the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion, but the Tin Woodman merely watched with interest, knowing the machine held no threat to him.

The Wizard listened intently, but seemed not to hear some additional noise he had expected. Then he switched the machine off, removed the inner bag again, and found only more dust.

"It didn't work!" he said. "Blame me, it didn't work! I thought

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the thief simply vacuumed up some of the gems, but there are plenty left in there and this thing didn't pick up a single one."

He turned the machine on again and applied the sucking device to his hand. Nodding his head slowly, he shut it off again. "Not strong enough. The gems would be too far away and too heavy for the machine to collect. It could pick up things like dust and those little thin pieces of wood we found, but not anything as heavy as the huge diamonds and rubies and emeralds."

The Wizard of Oz shook his head sadly. "I must admit I am thoroughly befuddled."

None of the others could think of anything to say to comfort the Wizard, and for a time the little group stood in silence.

Suddenly a new gleam of light appeared in the Wonderful Wizard's eyes. "Befuddled," he repeated. Then he clicked his heels like a much younger man and repeated again, "Befuddled! Of course! Befuddled! How could I have failed to see it before? Come with me back to the Throne Room!"

Back in the Throne Room, the Wizard of Oz stopped two of Ozma's servants who had just begun to sweep up the pile of thin wood chips. "You see before you," the Wizard announced, "the Magnificent Mennen's accomplice. Who is, of course, a Fuddle."

"A Fuddle!" exclaimed Princess Ozma, clapping her hands with understanding. Forgetting her regal bearing, she dropped to her knees and began to help the Wizard, who was fitting the pieces of wood together as if they were the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

"A Fuddle, of course," the three suspects said, nodding to one another knowingly.

Dorothy was unenlightened. "But what in the world is a Fuddle?"

"A citizen of Fuddlecumjig," the Wizard explained. "All the people in that unusual land are made up of these tiny pieces of wood, no two alike, and they fly apart whenever a stranger comes near. Then they must be put back together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and indeed they pride themselves on the difficulty they present as puzzles. I believe this particular Fuddle passed the jewels out to the Magnificent Mennen, then flew apart, and was gathered up by the vacuum cleaner."

"That's remarkably clever," said the Scarecrow.

"That explains how the Fuddle got out," said the Tin Woodman, who had creaked his way into a sitting position and was

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helping to join the pieces of wood. "But how in the world did he get in in the first place?"

"I have an idea about that too," said the Wizard, "but we're almost finished putting this fellow back together so maybe he can tell us."

"Yes, I can. Thank you," the Fuddle said. His upper body was now complete and he was watching with interest as the Princess Ozma and the Tin Woodman fitted the parts of his legs together. "I should never have become involved if I had suspected a real robbery. But when such a distinguished and honored citizen of Oz asked me to help him in a practical joke, well, how could I refuse?"

"You may justify yourself later," said Princess Ozma severely. "Explain how you got into the storeroom."

"Well, my cohort in crime — I shall not yet reveal his name to you, though now I suspect he's an impostor — my cohort in crime devised a marvelous stratagem —"

"Fuddle!" the Princess exclaimed. "If you don't get to the point, you'll be exiled to Rigamarole Town, where all unplain speakers are exiled."

"Well, he put my right arm together first, you see, and pushed it inside the storeroom through the air vent. Then he placed my eyes on the edge of the vent where they could see the inside of the storeroom. With these tools I was able to quickly put myself together, pass him the gems, then fly apart and get vacuumed out. If I had ever suspected I would be shut up in that bag for so long, I'd have had nothing to do with it. I mean it's one thing to fly apart in the clean fresh air, but —"

"Yes, we understand," said the Wizard. "You were foolish to be taken in, but I have been foolish at times myself. Now, I think it is time you revealed the brain behind this ingenious scheme."

The Fuddle raised his arm and pointed straight at the Scarecrow. The pseudo-strawman made a half-hearted attempt to bolt, but he was quickly seized by the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion. Dorothy reached up and pulled the burlap bag from his head, and the grinning countenance of the Scarecrow was replaced by the scowling face of the Magnificent Mennen.

"The brain," chuckled the Wizard of Oz. "That *is* ironic. The Scarecrow is the brain!"

"What have you done with the real Scarecrow?" Dorothy demanded.

"Left him hanging in a cornfield to scare crows, of course," said

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the defeated aviator. "He'll need someone to cut him down, but I didn't hurt him. I never intended to hurt anyone. Even my friend the Fuddle, I would have put him back together again before returning to the plane. If I hadn't been so anxious to come back and release him, I would have never been caught in your round-up of suspects, and I'd be back in the U.S.A. by now, my fortune made. The gems are hidden in a sand trap on the Emerald City Links. I assure you, I am not a criminal at heart. May I return to my plane and fly back home?"

"Of course," said Princess Ozma. "I don't think you would find the climate of Oz suitable to your particular temperament. Merely lead us first to the Scarecrow and then to the stolen gems and then you may return to your flying machine."

"I'm not sure I can find my way back to Kansas," the pilot admitted ruefully.

Ozma handed him a pair of bright green flying goggles. "These are the enchanted goggles, given to me by Glinda the Good. They will get you safely back to Kansas."

"And me too?" asked Dorothy. "Auntie Em and Uncle Henry will be so worried."

She saw in the faces of her friends the mixture of surprise and sadness she always saw there when she made the inexplicable request to return to Kansas. But the Magnificent Mennen, completely repentant now, promised to bring her back safely.

"Tell me this, Mr. Mennen," said the Wizard of Oz. "You knew some time ago we had penetrated your disguise. Why did you continue to pretend until you were actually fingered by the Fuddle?"

"I didn't believe you really knew who I was. I thought it was all a bluff. My disguise was absolutely perfect. I could have fooled the Scarecrow's own mother, if scarecrows have mothers."

"Not quite perfect. The eyes on your scarecrow mask are exactly the same size. But as Dorothy whispered in my ear, and as I ought to have observed for myself, the real Scarecrow's left eye is larger than his right."

"We should have seen that too," the Tin Woodman told the Cowardly Lion reproachfully.

"If you knew, why didn't you expose me there and then?" the aviator demanded.

"Please, sir," said the Wonderful Wizard, "I should not have to explain a bit of showmanship to anyone who goes by such a cognomen as the Magnificent Mennen!"

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a NEW short story by

ANN MACKENZIE

Ann Mackenzie and her husband, a geologist, live with their five daughters, two cats, and a beagle in Salisbury, Rhodesia — they have "made rose gardens in most parts of Africa south of the Sahara." Mrs. Mackenzie is "very home and family oriented," but finds time for writing: she has had two three-act plays performed in Rhodesia (how far away that sounds, but how happy we are to hear from writers all over the world!), and has had at least 30 short stories published in British and South African magazines.

Her first story in EQMM is about the power of evil. Do you believe in the powers of darkness? "If music be the food of love, play on"; if words be the food of thought, read on . . .

NIGHT OF THE SCARECROWS

by ANN MACKENZIE

I was certain I'd seen her somewhere or other before — the cold-faced woman in the plain dark dress, waiting outside the school. She stood noticeably apart from the rest of us — the gaggle of first-time Mums who'd arrived too early so as not to be late to collect their first-time offspring.

Certainly she was a newcomer to town. It was a small town, hot and ugly and out-of-the-way — the sort of place where you know everyone, and for better or worse everyone knows you. I definitely hadn't seen her there before. She belonged in some other, more distant part of my life.

I watched her, ransacking my memory for a name to match the hauntingly familiar face. When I found it, I went over to her.

"It's Mary Cummings, isn't it?" I said.

She drew back a little, and her dark eyes flickered. With swift recognition, and something else I couldn't quite define. Dislike? Fear? Ridiculous. I was imagining things.

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"I'm sorry," she said. "There must be some mistake." Her voice was cold, with an oddly jarring note of harshness in it.

But she knew me all right. I'd put on a bit of weight, but I hadn't changed as much as she had in seven years. Her face in the unkind sunlight was hard and lined.

"Dora Hunter," I said. "I used to be Dora Webb. Don't you remember? Why, Mary, of course you do."

"Dora," she said. "I'd forgotten." She avoided my eyes.

Well, if she didn't feel like starting a cheerful picking up of threads, she could leave that to me.

"Don't you remember that holiday in Europe — all students together? Goodness, it all seems like a beautiful dream. Remember Cliff — tall, red-headed, clownish, rather sweet? We were married when we got back, and since then it's been a husband to manage, a home to run, and three red-haired kids in indecently rapid succession. The oldest one's at school for the first time today and I'm feeling just the way you're meant to feel. All keyed up, and dying to know how Danny made out."

I paused for breath. And that was Mary's cue — first, to exclaim with pleasure at what I'd achieved, and then to give a similar account of herself. But she did neither.

She only said, very briefly, "My husband is dead."

I'd been tactless again. Next time, Dora, don't push yourself in where you're obviously not wanted, or blurt out the happy history of the Hunters to someone who'd almost certainly rather not hear it.

"My husband is dead." It was probably a recent thing, and might explain the white and haggard face, the almost mourning dress. What it didn't explain were the awakening echoes of a half-forgotten emotion in myself. Why should her words cause so deep a throb of sadness, so deep a sense of emptiness and pain and loss?

That was when I remembered Mike McGuire, Mary's constant companion on that holiday. I hadn't given him so much as a thought for years, and now he was back in my memory again as vividly as though I'd seen him last only that morning.

I used to wonder what they had in common. Mary was such a coolly practical person, dominated in her approach to life by a kind of fanatical skepticism.

"She believes in nothing," Mike used to say of her, smiling his

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slow warm smile. "Nothing at all, unless it can be expressed in terms of neat conclusive formulas."

During the long wrangling arguments that seemed to be their preferred forms of togetherness, her cry was always, "I won't accept that if it can't be proved." So why, I used to ask myself in anguish, was she Mike's girl? The answer was, "Because she's slim and clever, and everything she does has a kind of sparkle — the cold bright sparkle of a winter's day."

Where she was cold, Mike was like a roaring fire round which the rest of us gathered, basking in his warmth. His forebears were Irish, and Mike had the dark-haired, blue-eyed Irish charm. He was touched, I think, with an odd streak of the fey — certainly he had the deep respect of his people for the wild, the weird, the inexplicable, and the strange.

"What about myths and magic?" he once asked Mary.

"Primitive nonsense," she told him scornfully.

"My grandfather," Mike said, smiling into the fire, "never took a beast to market in his life without driving it first down the little lucky road that wound round the crabtree where the wee folk lived. He said it made all the difference to his prices."

"Ignorant superstition," Mary cried.

"It's as well," he said slowly, "to respect old rites and superstitions. You never know — you never can be sure."

"I'm sure," she said, frowning at him in increasing irritation.

And indeed she was. She believed that education and a balanced diet would act on the world like some all-powerful detergent, washing away the grime of old beliefs and leaving its people as bright, rational, and free from any taint of mysticism as Mary was herself.

Yet here was Mike, every bit as well-nourished and well-read as she was, respecting convictions she felt were symptomatic of underdeveloped bodies and unenlightened minds. His attitude made her feel angry and defeated; she brought up the argument more and more frequently as the days went by, with increasing fervor, as though it was an itch she had to scratch.

Mike didn't change his view. He just listened, and smiled as he defended it. He was always smiling — I think he was the most completely happy person I've ever met. Now the brightness went out of the day at the thought of him dead.

I said hesitating, knowing I shouldn't ask, but knowing too that I had to hear the answer, "Was it Mike?"

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She said coldly and curtly, "No. It wasn't Mike." But she didn't say who it had been.

So she hadn't married Mike McGuire after all. I wondered why. And then I remembered the strange thing that had happened the night we spent in the high Tyrolean village — the one the guidebooks called "The Village of the Scarecrows." A tiny village, remote, not visited often, and interesting only on one night of the year — the night our group had stayed at the little inn.

"Here, on the last night of August," the guidebook said, "after cleansing their cottages with pine boughs and herbs, the villagers transfer all evil among them to their scarecrows, in an age-old ritual. Then they lock themselves into their cottages and remain there till dawn. No one walks abroad that night in the village — except, say the villagers, the scarecrows themselves. The following morning, amid scenes of general rejoicing, the scarecrows are burned outside the village church."

"I never heard such pitiful rubbish in my life," Mary announced, as we all read this together. "It's exactly the sort of thing one should fight against."

"You can do your fighting with me, when we're safely locked up in the inn," Mike told her firmly.

She gave him a long, slow, thoughtful sort of look, which I couldn't read. Then, rather to my surprise, she laughed — a soft, warm, bubbling little sound — and put her dark head down onto his shoulder.

We watched the cleansing ceremonies that morning. The women, in full skirts and their best embroidered blouses, swept their neat little cottages with pine boughs twined with flowers, and were very cheerful about the whole affair, or so it seemed. They smiled at us and nodded as we passed. Round the village — a toy-sized cluster in the golden cup of the valley — the vast white bulk of the mountains filled the sky.

In the afternoon the people walked in procession round the fields. It was all rather disorganized and unimpressive, and very much a family affair, with harassed mothers clucking at boisterous children and groups of old women chattering together as they went.

Mike and Mary were walking hand in hand, as the young men and the girls of the village were doing. Mary had loosened her

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lovely long dark hair and wore a skirt instead of her usual trou sers — a full dark dirndl of some printed stuff. She looked softer more gentle than I'd ever seen her. Mike had made her a wreatl of yellow wildflowers to wear in her hair, and with that, and th skirt, she belonged in that landscape of mountains, fields, an sky. Until then I'd always found myself thinking of Mary agains a background of spotless tiles and gleaming test tubes.

There must have been four or five scarecrows there, not more – sad-looking raggedy things, standing askew in the shorn and gold en fields. A few old men took turns at beating them with th branches the women had used to sweep their houses, then left th pine boughs lying at the scarecrows' feet. Occasionally they burs into a snatch of song whose language bore little resemblance t their everyday speech.

"So old," Mike said — he was watching with passionate interes — "that probably they themselves don't know what it means." He paused and frowned thoughtfully. "And why scarecrows, I won der? There are no scarecrows in the other villages here. Unless," he said slowly, "unless the scarecrows were a substitute made centuries ago when Christianity came."

"For what?" I asked.

"For luckless travelers from other valleys who happened to pass this way round this time of year and were caught and kept fo human sacrifice."

I said, "I've never heard of anything so horrid."

"The scapegoat thing was sometimes pretty grim," Mike said absently. He was watching the villagers and listening; they were talking and laughing and gossiping together, seeming not to take very much notice of what was going on.

So it was strange how, when the last of the branches was dropped, a silence fell on all the people there. And strange, too, how they hurried back to the village without talk or laughter, and without looking back. Even the children were subdued and solemn then, and one or two of them whimpered and had to be hushed.

I looked back over my shoulder, though — just once. Was it only a trick of the fading light, or was the scarecrows' appearance subtly different? They no longer looked harmless, pathetic figures of fun — they seemed to have changed. And to be waiting, faceless, unmoving, and with terrible patience, for the coming of the dark.

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I shivered a little, muttering crossly to myself about mass suggestion — a phrase I'd often heard on Mary's lips. But I was glad when we stepped inside the small inn parlor, and glad when the bolts were fastened across the door.

We sat eating soup and crusty little rolls and wedges of the goats'-milk cheese they made in the village. Mary sat on the floor beside the fire; she still had that unfamiliar, rustic look, with the fading wreath of flowers in her hair.

Mike put out his hand and touched her cheek. She looked at him wide-eyed, seeming to respond to all that his touch implied.

"Do something for me?" she whispered half-smilingly.

"Anything at all," he answered.

I caught the flash of triumph in her eyes before they dropped and she looked at him under her lashes, demurely as any maiden of the village.

"I want you to walk through the fields with me tonight."

He drew back sharply. "Anything but that."

She was the old familiar Mary again in a moment. She said, white with anger and humiliation, "Do you mean to say you really believe all this? You really believe those harmless bundles of sticks are going to prowl about the village tonight?"

He said thoughtfully, "No. I wouldn't say I believe exactly that. But I do believe in the power of evil itself."

She mocked him in a bitter little singsong. "So the bogey-man will get you if you don't watch out."

"It's more than that. For centuries these people have believed that there's a kind of — well, a concentration of evil here tonight. I believe that this in itself is enough to attract some power of darkness to this place."

"Power of darkness?" she cried. "Are you out of your mind? This is the Twentieth Century, not the Twelfth."

He said, "The power of evil is infinite and eternal. Can't you see that time has nothing to do with it?"

She jumped up, still white with temper, hands clenched at her sides. "If you're afraid to go with me I'll go alone."

He stood and faced her, saying with a sort of gentle intensity, 'For the safety of your soul, Mary darlin', I wish you'd stay."

"What soul?" she flung at him in fierce contempt.

Then, without looking back at him or at any of us, she ran across the room and unbolted the door.

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Outside the village was washed with still white moonlight. I would have been difficult to imagine anything more peaceful. But all the same, not one of us followed her. Perhaps Mike's word still echoed in our minds: "For the safety of your soul . . ." We crowded behind the door, calling her back, more and more loudly as she ran down the narrow street.

She took no notice. Just ran and ran and ran as though possessed, her dark hair streaming behind her, until she was lost in the shadows cast by the moon, and we could no longer hear her flying feet.

When she came back at dawn we were all waiting up for her and the wreath of wildflowers was gone from her tangled hair.

After the long and anxious vigil of the night we gathered round her, our relief expressing itself in delighted laughter, all talking at once.

"Are you all right?" we asked her again and again.

"Of course I am," she answered dreamily. So why had her face that rapt and secret look, and why, when she answered, didn't she meet our eyes? The babble of talk and laughter died away; we looked at one another with a faint unease.

Mike went up to her then, holding out his hands to her. She made no move, nor did she speak to him. He took her hands and held them for a moment, then let them go abruptly, without a word.

He went to the window, flung the shutters open, and, looking out over the mountains, he crossed himself.

A silence fell and lengthened. Someone had to say something and say it soon.

"Are you coming to watch the scarecrows burned?" I asked Mary, in a vain attempt at casual cheerfulness.

"Burned?" she said, with a sudden note of harshness in her voice. "No. Not that. I'm going upstairs to rest."

She moved as though she were walking in her sleep. And why, I wondered, did none of us follow her?

The incident, in some way, affected us all. We seemed withdrawn and wary of one another, sharing, perhaps, an unspoken common guilt, and conscious that the spirit of our holiday, with its lighthearted easy comradeship, was changed and spoiled.

That afternoon Mike told us that he'd suddenly changed his

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plans; he was leaving us and going straight on to Rome. As far as I know, he didn't see Mary again, or leave any kind of message of farewell. The next morning Mary herself left as suddenly for home. I hadn't seen or heard of her since, until today.

It hadn't been a happy incident. Even I, plump tactless Dora Hunter, knew better than to remind her of it now. We stood in the sun in desperately uncomfortable silence, she with her white face turned a little aside.

So what to say? "What are you doing in this dreary little town?" No, better not. She was probably here from necessity, not from choice — as weren't we all — and the question might lead to further embarrassment. At last I had it — the safe, obvious way.

I asked as brightly as my discomfort would allow, "Are you waiting for offspring?"

Even that didn't help. She said, without expression, "Yes. My son."

The bell rang then, breaking into another waste of silence. I was more than thankful to hear it, and the immediate comfortable burst of noise — babble of voices, banging of desk lids, scudding of dozens of feet across stone floors. My thoughts returned with a motherly rush to Danny. I hurried to the gate and waited there, only half conscious of Mary following behind.

The children poured out — all the new ones first. Somewhere in that noisy surge would be Danny, his torch of hair hidden under the new cap. Ah, there he was — and just beside him walked another child. For no reason on earth that I could see the other child gave Danny's arm a vicious, twisting pinch.

I looked at him with sudden fierce dislike. He was taller than Danny, with a bony beautiful face and startlingly brilliant and malicious eyes. He'd already taken his cap off. The spiky blond hair stuck out round his head like straw, and the school uniform, which, surely, was brand-new, already looked as though he'd slept in it for a year.

Why, I thought, the child looks like a scarecrow.

As though he'd read my thoughts, the child's brilliant eyes met mine. He stretched out his arms, hands limp at his sides, head lolling, and hooted with laughter.

Mary Cummings stepped out from behind me. She looked at me for a moment in bitter, hostile silence. Then, without so much as glancing at the child, she took his hand and they walked away down the road.

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a NEW short story by

H. R. F. KEATING

Are there some things so important that the truth has to be told, no matter what? No matter who may be hurt? Even your own brother? . . . To a small boy the grown-up world is not always easy to understand . . .

LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE

by H. R. F. KEATING

Steven first saw the knife rather late at night. He had come downstairs to where his mother and father and big brother, Paul, were watching TV and had said he couldn't get to sleep.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Paul had sung out at once, in that teasing way of his.

"No, I'm not. You're a liar, pants on—"

"Hush," his mother had said sharply. "It's just coming to the end. Sit there quietly."

So he had sat next to her on the couch, curled his legs up under him, and kept as still as he could. He liked grown-up television, even when he didn't completely understand. It was always somehow more important.

So when it ended he begged, "Oh, please, just the advertisements," and his father had let him stay (he knew he would). And then had come "Police Five," the program on which they showed you real crimes and asked you to help the police, but this wasn't the junior version that came on Saturday mornings; this was the grownup version.

And that was when he saw the knife.

It flashed up on the screen right at the beginning and the man said, "Have you seen this knife? It is one of the type sold by the hundreds for kitchen use a few years ago, but it's got an odd split in the handle. If you recognize it, no matter who you think may have it, get in touch with the police at Cotham Green—"

And then, just as the police-station phone number was being

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given, Steven's mother leaped up and said loudly, "Not one second more." Steven knew why. It was because Cotham Green police station was the one for them. He had been to it with his mother when she had found a five-pound note on the pavement.

And now, as she bustled him out of the room and back to bed, he could just hear what he knew she didn't want him to hear properly — all about the young man who had broken into a tobacconist's in the High Street not expecting anyone to be there, and how the old tobacconist had "very courageously" tackled him, and how the intruder had lashed out with the knife, dropped it, and had run, and how the tobacconist was now gravely ill in hospital.

Then, just as his mother turned the light out, they must have had one of those put-together pictures of the attacker on the screen because he heard his father say to Paul, "Why, that might be any long-haired layabout. It might even be you, son. You're all the same, the lot of you."

And the terrible thing was, lying there in the dark, that it might truly have been Paul. Because, though his parents had not recognized the knife, Steven had — at least, he was almost sure he had. It was not a kitchen knife, or not one now anyhow. It was the old knife that had been right at the back of the tool shelf for as long as Steven had been able to see up that high.

Nobody ever used the knife. It was just one of those things you kept, just in case. And it did have a split in the handle. Steven couldn't be certain it was exactly the same split. On the screen it hadn't been very clear — they didn't have color TV — but it had looked very like what the man had called "an odd split."

He longed to get out of bed, creep down to the tool shelf, and see. But he couldn't. If they caught him out of bed again, they wouldn't believe him whatever he said.

But in the morning the knife was the first thing he thought of when he woke up, and, when he tiptoed down before anyone else was awake, he found it had gone. He hunted everywhere he could think of for it. But it wasn't anywhere.

And then at last he had to ask himself the questions he had been pushing away from himself the whole time. Was the young man they had shown on the Identikit picture really Paul? Was the knife shown on TV actually their knife? Was it Paul who had attacked the tobacconist? Paul was always complaining he didn't have enough money for cigarettes, and Dad was always saying he shouldn't smoke then. It all fitted in.

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What was he to do? He thought of telling his mother. But that would be squealing on Paul, and if Paul hadn't done it he was in enough trouble already for various other things, like smoking and always leaving his room in a perfect mess and spending his time at the disco with that Louise. No, unless he knew for certain certain, he couldn't go to a grownup. He would have to ask Paul himself.

So that evening, when Paul came back from playing football with his friends and they had had supper, Steven knocked on the door of his room (Paul got in a terrible temper if he didn't), went in, and asked him the question, just like that.

"Paul, have you seen that old knife that used to be in the back of the tool shelf?"

"No, I haven't," Paul said, looking up crossly from his unmade bed where he had been lying reading. "And what do you want to come barging in here for?"

"I wanted to know if you have that knife."

"What knife?"

"You know, the one that's always been on the tool shelf."

"Never heard of it. And you probably took it yourself and left it somewhere. You're always taking things you're not meant to, and then lying about it."

"I'm not."

"Oh yes, you are. What about the time you took Mum's cutting-out scissors and swore you hadn't, and then they turned up under a mound of junk in your room? And what about the time you 'just borrowed' my torch and lied black and blue about that?"

And from then on it just turned into a huge row, so that Steven could hardly remember what it had all been about to begin with, only hearing Paul's taunting voice chanting, "Liar, liar, pants on fire," till he'd had to turn and run away before the tears came.

But after that nothing more seemed to happen, and bit by bit Steven almost forgot about the knife. Till the following Tuesday.

It was then, just as Mum and Dad were about to go out for their every-other-week card-playing evening with the Allisons that the detectives called at the door. Was there anyone in the house between the ages of 15 and 25? And Dad called Paul, and the detectives said they were making house-to-house inquiries in connection with the stabbing incident at the tobacconist's in the High Street and where had Paul been spending the evening of Tuesday, a fortnight earlier?

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"Home, mate," Paul said quite cheerfully. "Home all evening. It's my baby-sitting night. For my kid brother."

But Steven knew that was a lie.

Paul had been in, but only for the first part of the evening. When he had thought his kid brother was safely asleep he had sneaked out.

But Steven hadn't been asleep. He had been reading under the bedclothes with the flashlight he had been given for his birthday after that row about "just borrowing" Paul's, and he had heard the gate outside, opened the curtain a crack, and seen Paul go off.

And now Paul was telling the detectives he wasn't out at all that night.

So, after all, the business about the knife had not been something he had just got a bit wrong. Paul must have taken it. No wonder the Identikit picture had looked like him. It must have really been Paul the person who had given the description had glimpsed running away from the tobacconist's. Paul was practically a murderer.

Suddenly Steven felt sick and found that, though it was a warm evening for April, he was icy cold. He sat where he was at the top of the stairs just outside his room, unable even to move. In his head the words of the man on TV seemed to be hammering and hammering, "If you recognize it as a knife you know, no matter who you think may have it, get in touch with the police." Almost without realizing it, he found that his parents had gone off to their cards evening.

And then, quite suddenly, he seemed to rise up out of his state of hunched misery knowing, almost as if he was a sort of programmed robot, what he was going to do. He got up, went quietly downstairs, made sure Paul was safely in the kitchen, softly opened the front door, and walked out.

He had no trouble finding the detectives. They were only four doors away. He went up to them, still seeming to hear that TV voice saying "get in touch with the police," and he did what he knew he must. There were some things so important that the truth had to be told, no matter what. And somehow he told it.

He saw the two detectives look at each other. And then one of them set off to go round to the rear, and after a couple of minutes the other one said, "Come on then," and they went up to his front door which had locked itself behind him when Steven had marched out, and knocked.

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Paul answered almost straight away and looked astonished when he saw his brother on the doorstep. But at once the detectives said in a grim-sounding voice that he had reason to believe Paul had not been telling the truth when he had said he had been at home all evening on the previous Tuesday.

All of a sudden Steven felt terrible, as if he were killing a puppy of his own because it had a dangerous disease. He couldn't look at Paul. And when the detective turned to him and asked what time Paul had left the house last Tuesday, he could hardly speak.

But, completely to his surprise, Paul didn't shout and yell at Steven the way he usually did when he was annoyed with him. And this time he had expected it to be twice as loud and twenty times as terrible. Instead, Paul spoke in a quiet voice and very seriously, not at all like the rather jokey way he had talked to the detectives earlier.

"Yes," he said, "that's quite right. I wasn't at home all the time."

Oh, gosh, it's true, thought Steven. And it's even worse this way than I thought it was going to be.

"Shall we go inside?" the detective said.

And without anybody saying anything they all three went in and in a minute the second detective came in from the back and joined them up in Paul's room.

"Now," the first detective said to Paul. "Suppose you just tell us all about it."

Steven kept still as a frozen spike. He felt that if somehow he could stop everything inside him he would do what he wanted to do above all, just vanish away into nothing.

"Yes," Paul said, "I did lie to you earlier on. But, you see, it was my parents being there. I'm meant to stay in and baby-sit every other Tuesday, but that night I'm afraid I sneaked out when I thought Steve here was asleep. I went down to the disco."

The detective's face suddenly took on a look of sad disappointment.

"Oh, yes?" he said. "And I suppose you just didn't happen to see a soul you knew?"

"But I did," said Paul. "Of course I did. I went there to see my girl friend, Louise. We were together the whole time, till just before my parents got back here. She only lives at Number Seventeen, you can go and ask her."

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The second detective left the room almost before Paul had finished.

"But the knife?" Steven said, feeling a last streak of doubt rise up. "What about the knife that isn't in the tool shelf any more?"

"Knife?" Paul said. "Do you mean the knife you asked me about the other day?"

Steven nodded yes. He couldn't speak.

"But I found that," Paul said. "I'd used it to open a tin of paint and it had got under a pile of records. Look."

And, sure enough, he picked up a crazy heap of records and there it was.

"Yes," the detective said. "Same sort as the one we found at the tobacconist's. But the mark on the handle is different, of course."

A minute after that the other detective came back. "Nice girl, your Louise," he said. And then they left, not at all as cross with Paul as Steven had expected.

"All in the day's work," one detective said.

"Night's work more like," the other said, looking up at the dark sky.

Paul didn't say anything about the mistake when the door was shut. He just gave Steven a smile and told him to hurry up to bed, put his light out, and go straight to sleep.

"Yes," Steven said.

He didn't mind. He had his flashlight and book under the bedclothes ready and waiting.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Barbara Callahan's first story, "The Sin Painter," appeared in the August 1974 issue of EQMM. We described it as an unusual and interesting mystery debut.

Mrs. Callahan's second story is a long step forward in her writing career. The second story is also unusual and interesting, but it is more: it is a sensitive and moving story, deeply felt by the author—so deeply felt that it will touch your heart . . .

LAVENDER LADY

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

It was always the same request wherever I played. College audiences, park audiences, concert-hall audiences—they listened and waited. Would I play it in the beginning of a set? Would I wait till the end of a performance? When would I play *Lavender Lady*?

Once I tried to trick them into forgetting that song. I sang four new songs, good songs with intricate chords and compelling lyrics. They listened politely as if each work were merely the flip side of the song they really wanted to hear.

That night I left the stage without playing it. I went straight to my dressing room and put my guitar in the closet. I heard them chanting *"Lavender Lady, Lavender Lady."* The chant began as a joyful summons which I hoped would drift into silence like a nursery rhyme a child tires of repeating. It didn't. The chant became an ugly command accompanied by stamping feet. I fled to safety.

Milo, my manager, found me in the closet with my guitar. His dark eyes, reproving and cold, told me I would be without him if I did not go back onstage. I couldn't bear the thought of facing the night alone.

I stood in the wings and listened to him lie. "Miranda will be right back. She broke a string. She loves to sing *Lavender Lady* as much as you love to hear it."

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The chanters applauded wildly. Milo slipped offstage and grabbed my arm.

"They'll forgive you this time," he snapped. "Now go out there."

"And you, Milo, you'll forgive me?"

"Yes, yes, but only this time."

Now I must play *Lavender Lady* at the end of every concert. I used to cry when I sang it but now I am drained so by it that Milo has to come onstage and carry me off. I slump over my guitar in a faint. I've been told that audiences love my finale.

I don't know exactly what happens to me when I play that song. I can remember only the introduction to it. After that the song takes over and tells me what to do.

It tells me to stare at a blankness over the heads of the audiences. In a review of my concert in Philadelphia a critic wrote: "Miranda Smith focuses on a fragment of space that becomes quite real to her. Perhaps lavender-colored ectoplasm materializes somewhere below the first balcony. The golden-haired folksinger becomes a medium for the expression of love offered and then terror unleashed. She begins *Lavender Lady* with a radiant smile and ends it with a sadness so overwhelming that it annihilates her. The last note of the song is like the final beat of her heart. Her arms slide limply over her guitar, her golden hair tumbles over the cold surface of the instrument. She becomes still, terribly still. Then the dark-haired prince, her manager, Milo McGee, comes to carry his Sleeping Beauty away.

"Once more the *Lavender Lady* has triumphed by pushing the frail musician into a trance from which, according to McGee, she awakens the following morning. Who is this Lavender Lady and why does she exert such power over the millionairess-singer? McGee has hinted that she is Miranda's mother, the lovely socialite who abandoned the child when she was eight years old."

Milo is such a liar. He knows she isn't Mother, yet he told a magazine writer that the last time I saw Mother she was wearing a lavender gown. She was wearing a brown fur coat.

The women hired by my father to care for me were old and irritable. I was horrible to all of them. When Father interviewed the young woman with the long blonde hair, I knew I would like her. As soon as we were introduced, she hugged me. The lavender scent she wore tickled my nose and made me sneeze. She told me she wouldn't use it any more, but I wanted her to. The lavender was a lovely clue to her presence. I could always find her.

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Lavender Lady, so young and so dear,
Lavender Lady, I know when you're near.

She taught me my lessons at home. We worked hard. Afterward we went down to the pond or to the grape arbor. We played wonderful games until I became tired. Then she put me on her lap and sang to me. At dusk I took her hand. We ran all the way home because we were two princesses being pursued by the Fiend of the Fields who wanted to change us into mushrooms.

Sometimes we tired of the arbor and the pond. We went outside the estate, across the road, and down to the rock pile. The rock pile was the moon and we climbed all over it. It was fun being a Moon Maiden until we met the Moon Monster.

The Lavender Lady never called him the Moon Monster. She called him Jim. She told me Jim was our secret friend whom we had met in a secret place. I was never to tell anyone about Jim who sat with his arm around her while I scrambled on the rocks. I never told anyone our secret.

Lavender Lady, the secrets we shared,
Lavender Lady, I never was scared.

Milo keeps secrets well, I think. His lies please him more than the truth. He knows about the Lavender Lady and the Moon Monster. He's the only one I ever talk to about them. He knows how I begged her to send Jim away. He spoiled our games so finally she did.

I told Milo about our journey too. The Lavender Lady asked my father if she could take me to visit her mother. Father wanted the chauffeur to drive us, but the Lavender Lady refused. Her mother would be embarrassed, she told Father, if such a magnificent car pulled up in front of her shabby house.

The Lavender Lady and I took a bus. It was the first time I had ever been on one. "You poor little rich girl," the Lavender Lady said as she helped me onto the bus. After a while I didn't care much for the gaseous odor. I put my head on her shoulder and breathed in her lovely lavender scent until I fell asleep.

She shook me gently at our stop. I looked up and down the street but I didn't see a shabby house. We walked around the block and waited for another bus. As we sat on the bench the Lavender Lady reached into her large handbag. "Surprise," she said, "we're going to surprise my mother. She thinks you are a little blonde-haired girl. We'll fool her. I'll put this on you."

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I laughed and laughed when I looked into the mirror of her compact. I had become a red-headed little girl with pigtails. And I laughed again when she put the red bandanna with black bangs on it over her head.

Lavender Lady, so pretty and wise,
Lavender Lady, you loved to surprise.

Milo is cruel sometimes. I wish I had never told him about the wig. When I wanted to avoid recognition on a flight to Los Angeles, he put a red wig with pigtails on me. After I threw it on the floor, Milo refused to fend off passengers who came to me for my autograph.

I took off the red wig when we left the bus. The walk was long and hot. The Lavender Lady wanted to run but I told her that the Fiend of the Fields didn't live around there.

Her mother's house was so ugly. The paint was peeling off and the porch was falling apart. We walked up two rickety steps when the door was opened by the Moon Monster.

"Where is her mother?" I asked him.

"She went away," Jim said.

"Like my mother did?" I asked.

"I guess so," he answered.

I hugged the Lavender Lady tightly. Poor beautiful thing. I knew exactly how sad she must have felt.

Lavender Lady, such sadness you've known,
Lavender Lady, you won't be alone.

Jim pulled me away from her and kissed her. I didn't like that so I kicked him. He raised his arm to hit me but the Lavender Lady blocked him. She took me into the kitchen and heated some soup. It was chicken noodle but it tasted odd. I fell asleep at the table.

When I woke up I was lying on a dirty cot in a bedroom. Jim was sitting on a chair next to me.

"Where did she go?" I cried.

"To make a phone call. Now go back to sleep."

I tried to get up but Jim pushed me down. The room was so smelly. When she returned she would wrap me in her lavender scent and everything would be all right again. When I heard her footsteps downstairs I ran to the door. Jim picked me up and dumped me on that terrible cot, then locked the bedroom door when he left. I pounded and pounded but she must not have heard.

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The next morning she brought me oatmeal. Then she washed my tear-stained face. When she rocked me back and forth in her arms I began to feel better. "Take me away from here," I begged.

"He won't let me do that," she said. "We'll just have to do what he says until we get our chance to escape. This is like one of our games by the pond. We're two princesses but we'll get away."

The Lavender Lady took me outside the awful house. We walked to a field where Stars of Bethlehem curtsied in the wind. She sat down and I made a garland for her hair. After I tired of picking flowers I wondered why we didn't walk through the fields into the woods, away from the ugly house and away from him.

"Now," I told her, "let's go now. He'll never know."

She shook her head. "He's upstairs in the house. He is looking at us through binoculars. He'll overtake us."

"But his car is gone. He drove away."

"No, little rich girl, that's a trick. He drove it around the back of the house. He's still there."

When he came walking through the field, smashing the flowers under his feet, she smiled at him. She could pretend so well. She jumped up and hugged him. Together they opened a suitcase filled with money. She tossed some of it into the air.

"Green snow," she sang, "green snow, the loveliest snow."

Her garland fell off as she danced around with Jim. I picked it up and pulled it apart.

In fields full of flowers, we spent happy hours,
Beneath trees dark and shady, dear Lavender Lady.

Milo is talking now to someone outside my bedroom door. He's saying, "She didn't care a hoot for her, you know, but the crazy kid thought she did."

"Miranda's naive," a voice answers.

It's my secretary. Milo is talking to her about me. He must be telling her about my mother. Milo is lying again. I always knew mother never cared a hoot for me.

When I was back on that filthy cot I could hear the Moon Monster and the Lavender Lady talking, just as I can hear Milo and my secretary now. The Moon Monster was saying something about getting rid of me because I would recognize him later. I became frightened until I heard her say that she would take care of me. Everything would be all right. She would take care of me.

The next morning he sat sullenly at the table while she made breakfast for us.

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"Why feed her? Hurry up, will you?"

She flashed him a stern look that silenced him. She winked at me. I winked back. I knew we would be leaving him that day.

We walked slowly to the field of Stars of Bethlehem. When we were down the hill I grabbed her hand. I touched something in it that was cold and hard. It fell to the ground into the flowers. The sunlight hit it while it was falling and it glistened like silver.

"My watch," she cried, "I dropped my watch."

She began to push aside the flowers but I pulled at her.

"Father will get you another one, come on."

She continued clawing at the flowers. I wanted her to leave. A game would do it. She loved games. I spread my arms and fluttered them.

"I'm a butterfly, a yellow butterfly. I'm flying, I'm flying. You're the Lavender Locust and you must catch me."

I flew away. I turned back once and saw her starting to get up. I flew up and down hills. I came to a stream. It was a good place to wait for her. I took off my shoes to wade for a bit.

"Butterfly, butterfly, where are you?" she called.

She was coming. I was so happy.

"You can't catch a butterfly," I shouted. It was nice that she was playing the game. When she came closer I saw that there was something shiny in her hand. She had found her watch. She stopped by a tree to catch her breath. Then she started to run toward me.

But I liked being a butterfly. I liked having her chase me. I didn't want the game to end. I giggled when I saw the stepping stones a few yards from me. I ran in the water to the first one and then to the second. I jumped across on all of them, skidding only once on the green slime that covered them. I sat down across the stream to wait for her.

Her golden hair flying, she skipped from the first to the second stone. And to the third. But on the fourth stone her foot slipped on the green slime. I screamed as she fell backward and hit the side of her face on the third stepping stone. When her head rolled over I saw the reddish-purple bruise on her fair skin. She tried to get up but she fell back again, back on that hard terrible rock. The stream water next to her turned red.

Lavender Lady, clear water runs red,
Lavender Lady, you cannot be dead.

I cannot sleep tonight as I usually do after a concert. My eyelids

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have become reddish-purple curtains. They are the same color as the bruise on the Lavender Lady's face. They are the same color as that ghastly shirt Milo is wearing tonight. I've asked him not to wear it, but he told me my secretary likes it.

They're still talking outside my door. Milo is not talking about my mother. He is talking about the Lavender Lady and he is telling my secretary a vicious lie about her. I can bear his other lies, but not this one. He is saying that the silver thing I saw in the Lavender Lady's hand was not a watch, but a knife. He's saying, "She had a silver pocketknife with her to kill a kid who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth."

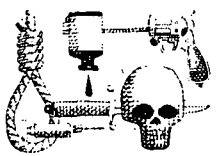
I'll have to prove to Milo it was a watch. I'll take him to that stream. Perhaps the watch is still there, rusted and buried under the stepping stone. When I take him, I'll ask him to wear the reddish-purple shirt. It will go well with his face if he happens to slip.

Reddish-purple, reddish-purple. What was the word printed on that colored pencil I had when I was a child? Magenta, yes, that's it, magenta.

Such a lyrical word. It should be in a song. I need a new song, a new song that will captivate me just as *Lavender Lady* did. I'm getting a melody in my head right now. It is so sad it makes me cry. This song will be better than *Lavender Lady*. It will be a better ending for my concerts. It will thrill my audiences. It will overwhelm me.

I've got the first two lines. They go like this:

Magenta man, once kind and strong,
Magenta man, you've done me wrong.



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a NEW Library Fuzz story by

JAMES HOLDING

Hal Johnson, the Library Cop, the Collector of Overdues and the Nemesis of Vanished Volumes, proves that sometimes you can make a mountain out of a molehill. The Bookhunter at his bookhunting and manhunting best . . .

THE MUTILATED SCHOLAR

by JAMES HOLDING

I was standing in the rear of a crowded bus when I caught sight of the stolen library book.

It was the wildest coincidence, the sheerest accident. For I don't ride a bus even twice a year. And normally I can't tell one copy of a particular library book from another.

I craned my neck to get a clearer view past the fellow hanging to a bus strap beside me. And I knew immediately that I wasn't making any mistake. That library book tucked under the arm of the neatly dressed girl a few seats forward was, without a doubt, one of the 52 library books which had been in the trunk of my old car when it was stolen six weeks before. The police had recovered my car three days later. The books, however, were missing — until I spotted this one on the bus.

Maybe I'd better explain how I recognized it.

As a library cop, I run down overdue and stolen books for the Public Library. I'd been collecting overdues that day, and about eleven in the morning I'd got back a bunch of books from a wealthy old lady who'd borrowed them from the library to read on a round-the-world cruise. She couldn't have cared less when I told her how much money in fines she owed the library after ten weeks' delinquency. And she couldn't have cared less, either, when I taxed her with defacing one of the books.

It was a novel called THE SCHOLAR, and she'd deliberately — in an idle moment on the cruise, no doubt — made three separate burns on the cover with the end of her cigarette, to form two eyes

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and a nose inside the O of the word SCHOLAR. I was pretty irritated with her, because that sort of thing is in the same class with drawing mustaches on subway-poster faces, so I charged her two bucks for defacing the book in addition to the fine for overdue. You can see why I'd remember that particular copy of THE SCHOLAR.

I scrutinized the girl now holding it under her arm on the bus. She certainly didn't look like the kind of girl who goes around stealing old cars and Public Library books. She was maybe 30 years old, well-dressed in a casual way, with a pretty, high-cheekboned face and taffy-colored (dyed?) hair, stylishly coiffured.

A crowded bus wasn't exactly the best place to brace her about the book, nevertheless I began to squeeze my way toward her between the jammed passengers.

I wanted to know about that book because I still winced every time I recalled the mirth of Lieutenant Randall of the Police Department when I called him that first day to report the theft of my car and books. First he had choked with honest laughter, then he accused me of stealing my own library books so I could make myself look good by finding them again, and finally he offered to bet I had sunk my car in the river somewhere so I could collect the insurance on it. The idea of a book detective being robbed of his own books sent him into paroxysms. It was understandable. I used to work for him and he's always needled me about quitting the police to become a "sissy" library cop.

The girl with the book was seated near the center doors of the bus. I managed to maneuver my way to a standing position in front of her, leaned over, and in a friendly voice said, "Excuse me, Miss. Would you mind telling me where you got that library book you're holding?"

Her head tilted back and she looked up at me, startled. "What?" she said in a surprised contralto.

"That book," I said, pointing to THE SCHOLAR. "My name is Hal Johnson and I'm from the Public Library and I wonder if you'd mind telling me where —"

That was as far as I got. She glanced out the window, pulled the cord to inform the bus driver of her desire to get off, and as she squeezed by me toward the center doors of the bus she said, "Excuse me, this is my stop. This book is just one I got in the usual —"

The rest of what she said was lost in the sound of the bus doors

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swishing open. The girl went lithely down the two steps to the sidewalk and made off at a brisk pace. I was too late to follow her out of the bus before the doors closed, but I prevailed on the driver to reopen them with some choice abuse about poor citizens who were carried blocks beyond their stops by insensitive bus drivers who didn't keep the doors open long enough for a fast cat to slip through them.

While I carried on my dispute with the bus driver, I'd kept my eye on the hurrying figure of the girl with THE SCHOLAR under her arm. So when I gained the sidewalk at last, I started out at a rapid trot in the direction she'd gone.

Being considerably longer-legged than she was, I was right behind her when she approached the revolving doors to Perry's Department Store. Whether or not she realized I was following her I didn't know. As she waited for an empty slot in the revolving door, a middle-aged, red-haired woman came out. She caught sight of my quarry and said in a hearty tone, loud enough for me to hear quite plainly, "Why, hello, Gloria! You here for the dress sale too?"

Gloria mumbled something and was whisked into the store by the revolving door. I hesitated a moment, then stepped in front of the red-haired woman and said politely, "That girl you just spoke to—the one you called Gloria—I'm sure I know her from somewhere—"

The red-haired woman grinned at me. "I doubt it, buster," she said, "unless you get your hair styled at Heloise's Beauty Salon on the South Side. That's where Gloria works. She does my hair every Tuesday afternoon at three."

"Oh," I said. "What's her last name, do you know?"

"I've no idea." She sailed by me and breasted the waves of pedestrian traffic flowing past the store entrance. I went through the revolving door into Perry's and looked around anxiously. Gloria, the hairdresser, was nowhere in sight.

After a moment's survey of the five o'clock crowd jamming the store's aisles, I turned away. I was due to meet Susan for drinks and dinner at The Chanticleer in half an hour. And I figured Susan, whom I hoped to lure away from the checkout desk at the Public Library into marriage with me, was more important than a stolen copy of THE SCHOLAR. Especially since I now knew where to find Gloria and the stolen book.

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Some of my pickups next morning were on the South Side, so it wasn't out of my way to stop at Heloise's Beauty Salon. I went in, and letting my eyes rove uneasily about the shop, feeling self-conscious, I asked at the reception counter if I could speak to Gloria for a minute.

"Gloria Dexter?" said the pretty black receptionist. "I'm afraid you can't. She's not here this morning."

"Her day off?"

"No. Yesterday was her day off."

"How come she's not here today?"

"We don't know. She just didn't show up. She usually calls in if she can't make it, but this morning she didn't."

"Did you try telephoning her?" I asked.

She nodded. "No answer."

"Well," I said, "maybe I can stop by her home. All I wanted to ask her about was a library book that's overdue. Where's she live?"

After I'd shown her my ID card, the receptionist told me Gloria Dexter's address. I thanked her and left.

The address wasn't fifteen minutes away. It turned out to be a single efficiency apartment perched on top of what used to be a small gatehouse to a private estate. The private estate was now two fourteen-story highrises set back from the street in shaded grounds. The only way up to Gloria's apartment was by a rusty outside stairway rather like a fire escape.

I was just starting up it when somebody behind me yelled, "Hey!"

I stopped and turned around. The hail had come from a burly man in dirty slacks and a T-shirt, who was clipping a hedge behind the gatehouse. "No use going up there, Mister," he informed me, strolling over to the foot of Gloria's staircase. "Miss Dexter isn't there."

I'd been expecting that. I said, "Do you know where she is?"

"At Memorial Hospital probably," he replied, "or the morgue. They took her off in an ambulance a couple of hours ago. I was the one who found her."

I hadn't been expecting that. "Did she have an accident or something?"

"She sure did. Fell all the way down that iron staircase you're standing on. Caved in her skull, it looked like to me."

I assimilated this news in silence. Then, "You found her at the bottom of this staircase?"

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"Yep. Like a ragdoll."

"What time?"

"Eight thirty this morning when I came to work. I'm the yardman here. The ambulance boys said she'd been dead for quite a while, so she musta taken her tumble last night sometime."

Remembering the pretty receptionist at Heloise's Beauty Salon, I said, "I stopped at the beauty shop where she works before I came here. They're worrying about her because she didn't show this morning. Maybe you ought to let them know."

"Never thought of that. Who'd you say you were, Mister?"

I showed him my ID card. "I wanted to see Miss Dexter about an overdue library book," I said. "Say, could I go up and get the book out of her place now? It'll save the library a lot of bother later on."

"Go ahead," the yardman said. "On second thought, I'll come with you, to see you don't take nothing but your library book." He grinned, exposing stained teeth. "Besides, you can't get in her place 'less I let you in. It's locked."

We climbed the rusty iron steps together. He unlocked the door at the top and we went into the Dexter apartment. It was as simple, pretty, and tasteful as Gloria herself. A daybed with a nubby red-and-gold coverlet stood against one wall, and over the bed there was a single hanging shelf filled with books.

I went straight to the bookshelf. "The book I want should be here somewhere," I said to the yardman. My eyes went down the row of spines. THE SCHOLAR wasn't there. Neither was any of the other 51 library books that had been stolen with my car.

"Take a look in her kitchenette and bathroom," the yardman advised me. "People read books in funny places."

A quick search failed to turn up THE SCHOLAR anywhere in the apartment.

The yardman was becoming impatient. "Tough luck," he said. "I guess you'll have to wait for the book and get it the hard way." He looked at the telephone on a dropleaf table near the kitchenette door. "I'll call her beauty shop from here," he said. "It'll be handier." He opened the telephone book, then hesitated. "What's the name of the place, anyhow?" he asked me. "Some fancy French name I can't remember."

"I'll look it up for you," I said. "Heloise's Beauty Salon is what it's called. With an H." I riffled through the telephone book and found the number for him. Another number on the same page was

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underlined in red. The yardman thanked me and I thanked him, and as I left, he was dialing the beauty shop.

My car was stifling when I climbed back into it. I rolled down the windows and sat for a couple of minutes, trying to figure out what to do next. Finally I drove downtown, left my car in the parking lot behind Perry's Department Store, and went inside.

At the Lost and Found counter I asked the girl, "Has a Public Library book been turned in recently?"

She gave me a funny look and said, "Yes, the clean-up crew found one in a trash basket."

"Mine," I said with relief. "May I have it, please?"

"Can you describe it?" she said.

"Sure. The title is THE SCHOLAR. There are three cigarette burns inside the O on the cover. Like eyes and a nose." When she looked prim I added, "Somebody else put them there, not me."

She was suddenly businesslike. "That's the book, all right. But we don't have it here. You'll have to claim it at the Security Office." She dropped her eyes. "I turned it over to them a few minutes ago."

"What did you do that for?" I asked curiously.

"Ask Security," she said. "Mr. Helmut."

"I will. Mr. Helmut. Where can I find him?"

She pointed toward the balcony that ran along one side of Perry's street floor. "Up there. Behind the partitions."

I mounted to the balcony and pushed open an opaque glass door with the word *Security Office* stenciled on it. An unattractive girl with dull eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses was sitting at a desk inside the door, typing. She asked me what I wanted in a no-nonsense voice that didn't go with her bitten fingernails.

"You the Security Chief?" I asked, giving her my best smile.

"Don't be silly!" she answered sharply. "Mr. Helmut is our Security Chief."

"Then I'd like to see him for a minute, please."

"He's out in the store making his morning round. Maybe I can help you?"

"Your Lost and Found desk sent me up here to ask about a book from the Public Library that was found in the store last night."

She gave me a blank look. "I'm sorry. I don't know anything about any library book. Mr. Helmut ought to be back soon if you'd

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care to wait." She waved at one of those form-fitting chairs for which I understand the Swedes are responsible. I sat down in it.

Ten minutes later a burly black-browed man with long sideburns pushed open the Security door and came in. He paused abruptly when he saw me. He had my stolen copy of THE SCHOLAR in his hand.

"Mr. Helmut," his secretary fluted, "this gentleman is waiting to see you about a library book."

He shot me a sharp glance out of quick intelligent brown eyes and said, "Okay. Come on in." He held the door to his private office open and I preceded him inside. He motioned me to a straight chair and sat down behind a desk bearing a small metal sign that read *C. B. HELMUT*. He put my library book on the desk top and raised his black eyebrows at me.

"A library book?" he inquired. "This one?" He pointed at THE SCHOLAR.

I nodded. "That's the one. It was stolen from me some time ago, Mr. Helmut. The reason I'm here is that yesterday, on a bus, I saw a girl carrying it under her arm. I recognized it by those burns on the cover. When I tried to ask the girl about it, she ducked into your store — maybe to brush me off in the crowd of shoppers, or maybe to get rid of the stolen book before anybody caught her with it."

"The clean-up crew found it in a trash basket here last night," Helmut said.

"So your Lost and Found girl told me. She also told me the book was turned over to her first. Then she turned it over to you. Mind telling me why?"

"Routine security measure, that's all." Helmut ran a thick finger over the cigarette burns on the cover of THE SCHOLAR. He was enjoying himself, acting the important executive.

"Security measure?" I said. "How does store security come into it?"

Idly he opened the cover of THE SCHOLAR and leafed through the first 20 pages or so in a leisurely manner, wetting his fingertip to turn the pages. Then suddenly he said, "Look here, Mr. Johnson," and held out the opened book for my inspection.

THE SCHOLAR was a 400-page book, more than two inches thick. The copy Helmut held out to me was only a dummy book. The insides had been cut out to within half an inch of each edge, so that the book was now, in effect, an empty box, its covers and the few

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pages left intact at front and back concealing a cavity about seven inches long, four wide, and an inch and a half deep.

I said, "So that's it."

"That's it," Helmut echoed me. "A shoplifting gimmick. You see how it works? Shoplifter comes into the store, puts down her library book on the counter while she examines merchandise, and when our salesclerk isn't looking, the shoplifter merely opens the book and pops in a wrist watch or a diamond pin or a couple of lipsticks or whatever and walks out with them, cool as you please."

Helmut shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Can you imagine a more innocent-looking hiding place for stolen goods than a Public Library book? Why, it even lends class to the shoplifter, gives her literary respectability."

"Shoplifting!" was all I could think of to say.

"Pilferage ran almost a million bucks in this store last year," Helmut went on. "Most of it shoplifting. So we're pretty well onto the usual dodges — shopping bags with false bottoms, loose coats with big inside pockets, girls leaving fitting rooms with three or four sweaters under the one they wore going in, and so on. But this library-book trick is a new one on me. And it's a beaut!"

It was a beaut all right. I said, "You better watch out for more of the same, Mr. Helmut. Because that girl stole fifty-one other library books when she stole this one. Out of my car."

"Ouch!" he said. Then, "You're from the Public Library?"

I nodded and showed him my card.

"Well," said Helmut, "since you scared her yesterday, let's hope she'll think twice about using the library-book method again."

"Let's hope so. Can I have the book now?"

"Sure," he said. He handed me the book.

"I wish I hadn't lost the girl last evening," I said. "I might have got my other books back too."

"Wouldn't do you much good if she's gutted them all like that one," Helmut said as I went out.

At two o'clock I was sitting across his scarred desk from Lieutenant Randall, my old boss. I'd just related to him in detail my adventures in recovering THE SCHOLAR, now considerably the worse for wear. The book lay on his desk between us.

Randall put his cat-yellow eyes on me and said, "I'm very happy for you, Hal, that you managed to recover a stolen book for your

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little old library. Naturally. But why tell me about it? Petty book theft just doesn't interest me." He was bland.

I gave him a grin and said, "How about first-degree murder, Lieutenant? Could you work up any interest in that?"

He sat forward in his chair. It creaked under his weight. "You mean the Dexter woman?"

I nodded. "I think she was killed because I spotted her with my stolen book."

"She fell downstairs and fractured her skull. You just said so."

"She fell downstairs, all right. But I think she was pushed. After somebody had caved in her skull in her apartment."

"Nuts," Randall said. "You're dreaming."

"Call the coroner," I suggested. "If the dent in her head was made by hitting one of those rusty iron steps, there could be some rust flakes in the wound. But I'll bet there aren't any."

"Jake hasn't looked at her yet. She only came in this morning. I've seen the preliminary report — fatal accident, no suspicion of foul play."

"Ask him to take a look at her now, then."

"Not until you give me something more to go on than rust flakes." He laced his voice with acid. "You're a showoff, Hal. So you probably think you know who killed her, right? *If* she was killed."

"Mr. C. B. Helmut," I said. "The Security Chief at Perry's Department Store. That's who killed her."

Randall's unblinking yellow stare didn't shift. "What makes you think it was Helmut?"

"Three pieces of what I consider solid evidence."

"Such as?"

"Number One: when I looked up the phone number of Heloise's Beauty Salon for the yardman in Gloria Dexter's phone book, there was another number on the same page underlined in red ink."

Randall frowned. "Helmut's?"

"C. B. Helmut."

"If she was a shoplifter," Randall said, "why the hell did she want to know the phone number of Perry's Security Chief?"

"Especially," I said, "since the underlined phone number was Helmut's *home* number, not the extension for Security at Perry's Department Store."

Randall's knuckles cracked as he curled his hands into fists.

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"What's evidence Number Two?" he asked in a neutral tone.

"Helmut called me by name, although I was a perfect stranger to him and he to me."

Randall said, "Why not? You showed him your ID card."

"He called me Mr. Johnson before he saw my ID card."

"The Lost and Found girl or his secretary told him who you were."

"I didn't tell either one of them my name."

"Well." Randall stared past my shoulder in deep thought. "He knew who you were and what your job was before you told him, then?"

"Yes. And there can be only one explanation for that."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. You think he stole your car and your books."

"Right. I'm sure he recognized me the minute he saw me today."

"I don't see what the hell that has to do with Dexter's murder."

"Dexter was in cahoots with Helmut," I said. "She told him I followed her and chased her into the store."

"Wait a minute," Randall said. "You've lost me."

I laid it out for him. "The girl was scared when I braced her about the library book. She ducks into Perry's to lose me, but has the bad luck to meet one of her hairdressing customers at the entrance. From inside the door she looks back and sees that I have stopped her customer and am obviously asking about her, about Dexter. So she panics. She steps into one of the store telephone booths, gets Helmut on the phone, tells him a Hal Johnson from the Public Library is hot on her trail and by now probably knows who she is on account of the hairdressing customer. What should she do?"

Helmut tells her not to come near the Security Office, just throw the library book into a trash basket and go on home. And deny she ever had the book if anybody asks her again about it. Helmut hopes the book will be burned in the store incinerator with the other trash, of course. But the book is turned in to the Lost and Found desk this morning, so Helmut's stuck with it. And I show up before he can dispose of it."

"You should have been a detective," Randall said, deadpan. "I still don't see how that gets Dexter murdered."

"Helmut knows I'll get to Dexter sooner or later, now that I know who she is. He knows I'll apply pressure about the stolen

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book and eventually go to the police. So he figures she'll blow the whole sweet setup he's got going for him, unless he takes her out of the picture completely."

"What setup?"

"Don't you get it? The guy's a modern Fagan," I said. "He's got a bunch of girls like Dexter shoplifting for him all over town! Using scooped-out library books — the books he stole from me — as containers. And reporting to him by telephone at home."

Randall took that without blinking. "Well, well," he murmured. He contemplated his folded hands on the desk top. "You said something about a third piece of evidence?"

I gave him a sheepish look. "I hesitate to tell you about that one. It's slightly illegal."

"So is your friend Helmut, you think. So tell me."

"I talked my way past Helmut's super and got into his apartment at Highland Towers —"

Randall blinked at last. "And —?" he said.

"I found twenty-seven of my stolen library books at the back of his clothes closet."

"Scooped out?"

I shook my head. "No, perfectly normal."

"So." Lieutenant Randall leaned back and put his hands behind his head, his elbows spread. "Twenty-seven, you said? You think he's got people using the other twenty-five books in shoplifting for him?"

I nodded.

"That he's recruited a gang of otherwise respectable people like Dexter to turn shoplifter for him?"

I nodded again.

Randall ruminated aloud. "He's store Security Chief. In the course of his job he runs into a lot of people who are *already* shoplifters, is that what you mean? So he blackmails some of them into working for him by threatening them with the police?"

"It could be, couldn't it?"

Randall looked at me with the air of a man who suspects his son of cheating on a geography exam. "Hal," he said, "you recently remarked, and I quote: 'The guy's a modern Fagan. He's got a bunch of girls shoplifting' et cetera." He tapped his desk top with a finger like a sausage. "How do you know they're all *girls*? You holding out something else?"

"I found a list of girls' names in one of the stolen library books

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in Helmut's place. Here's a copy." I tossed an old envelope on his desk.

He made no move to touch it. "That isn't evidence, Hal. It could be a list of his daughter's friends. Members of his wife's bridge club. Anything."

I said, "I *know* one of the girls on that list, Lieutenant. Ramona Gomez — she works in the library cafeteria. Couldn't you go and ask her in a friendly way if she's been blackmailed into shoplifting for Helmut? With what you know now, it shouldn't be hard to make her talk."

Randall stood up. "Yeah," he grunted, "I guess I could do that much, Hal. And a couple of other things too. Leave the book, will you?"

"Let me know how you make out," I said, "because the books in Helmut's closet still belong to the library, you know."

I was at home having a lonely shot of Scotch after my delicious TV dinner when Lieutenant Randall phoned. Seven hours. He was a fast worker.

"How's the stolen library-book business?" he asked by way of greeting.

"Booming," I replied. "And how's it with the brave boys of Homicide?"

"Also," he said. "We've got your pal Helmut."

"For Murder One?"

"What else? That print we turned up under the dash of your stolen car, remember? It's Helmut's."

"Good," I said. "Does it match anything else?"

"Strange you should ask," said Randall. "It matches a thumbprint on the metal buckle of Dexter's dress. I guess Helmut dragged her to the iron stairway by the belt after he conked her."

"No rust flakes in her head wound?"

"None."

"What'd he conk her with?"

"Swedish ashtray. Glass. Hers. Weighs about two pounds. A perfect blunt instrument. His prints are on that too."

"Careless, wasn't he?"

"You might say so. He failed to reckon with the brilliance of the police is how I'd put it."

"You talked to Ramona Gomez?"

"Yep. We couldn't turn her off when we hinted that Helmut had

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knocked off Dexter. She spilled everything. Helmut caught her shoplifting at Perry's and blackmailed her into working for him, just as you figured. Same with the other girls."

"Poor Ramona," I said. "You're not going to take any action against her, are you?"

"Immunity," said Randall wryly, "in exchange for her memoirs about Helmut. Same with all the girls on the list."

I sipped my whiskey and asked, "Did Ramona say anything about fingering me to Helmut?"

"Yeah. She admitted telling Helmut he could get a whole load of books from the Public Library without any chance of their being traced if he just swiped your car when you had the trunk filled with overdues." Randall chuckled. "Your Ramona pointed you out to Helmut as a prime source for library books when he got his big idea about using them for shoplifting."

"That wasn't nice of Ramona," I said. "Maybe you better charge her with conspiracy or something, after all."

"We only picked up Helmut half an hour ago," Randall said. "He was taking a briefcase full of stolen goodies to the fence he's been using. We trailed him to the fence before we jumped him, and got the fence too. Isn't that clever?"

"Brilliant," I said. "Who's the fence? Anybody I know?"

"None of your business. You're a book detective, remember? Fences are for adult cops, my boy."

"As a book detective, then, I'm interested in whether any more of the library's books will turn up as shoplifters' tools," I said. "Bad for the library's image — you can understand that, Lieutenant."

"Don't fret yourself, Hal. Helmut called all his girls last night after killing Dexter and instructed them to discontinue using library books in their work. At least, that's what all the girls have told us."

"That means the library's lost twenty-five books, Lieutenant. Who wants to read a scooped-out novel, even for free? But you got the other twenty-seven for me, didn't you, out of Helmut's closet?"

"Evidence," said Randall. "You'll get them back after Helmut's trial."

"What!" I yelled. "That'll be months, maybe years!"

Randall sounded hurt. "You've got nobody but yourself to thank for that," he said. "If you're going to solve my murders, you can't blame me for collecting your library books."

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Marcia Hamilton informed us that she is "a musician by trade, currently involved in two productions of a new musical" which she recently wrote . . .

A HYMN OF THANKS AND PRAISE

by MARCIA HAMILTON

How dull are real-life arsonists and rapists!
Praise be for prose that lets us be escapists!
What stimulates the mind and stirs the heart
Like mayhem lifted to consummate art?
What words of ours can properly express
Our gratitude for well-wrought wickedness?
What eulogy repay the debt we owe
To Wilkie Collins and Edgar Allan Poe?

Let us remember in our nightly prayers
Margery Allingham and Dorothy L. Sayers,
As we in all humility implore
That Nero Wolfe not be kept from our door.
Blessings on those who give us landscapes bleak,
Bumps in the night and spiral stairs that squeak
And sinister houses set on moorlands misty.
Sing hallelujah! *Adoramus te*, Christie!

In heaven, we trust, a special golden harp'll
Resound for Miss Maud Silver and Miss Marple,
While from a neighboring cloud a shining crown
Graces the reverend head of Father Brown.
Angels, pluck out in accents mixolydian
A stirring tune for Maigret and for Gideon.
Sound the bright trumpet; let the chorus swell
In thundering cadences for Dr. Fell.

Ye powers that be, oh, never be so harsh
As wholly to sever us from Ngaio Marsh;

c 1976 by Marcia Hamilton.

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And saints preserve us from those ignoramuses
Who fail to glorify such deathless shamuses
As Marlowe, Moto, Pam and Jerry North,
Appleby, Archer, Ghote, and so forth
(And, lest this be thought too elite a crew,
Let's hear it now for plucky Nancy Drew).

Hosanna *in excelsis*, *sans* restraint!
All glory, laud and honor to the Saint.
Thanks be to Symons, thanks to Dashiell Ham-
Met, who speaks out and calls a Spade a Sam;
And, above all, to the lord of crime's demesne:
God bless, protect, and save our noble Queen.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

TERMINAL ILLNESS

by C. McINERNEY

Though the plot may be worth recommending,
It's the reader whose doom is impending —
For he battles with crime
When he vows, every time,
Not to steal a quick glance at the ending.

c *1976 by C. McInerney.*

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

GIANT STEP: One of the most important events in the publishing history of mystery fiction is being undertaken by the University of California, San Diego Extension. It is establishing a project called The Mystery Library which will have as its objectives: (1) to republish fine mystery fiction that is not otherwise obtainable in hardbound editions; (2) to publish an original "appreciation of the mystery story" book, called *The Mystery Story,* which may also be used as a textbook; (3) to create and make available to schools, colleges and universities everywhere courses on the mystery story (when the best of mystery literature is again available through the publications of The Mystery Library).

An editorial board consisting of some of the most distinguished members of the world of mystery fiction has been selected. John Ball, creator of Virgil Tibbs, is Chairman of the board and Editor-in-Chief of The Mystery Library. Other members of the board are Robert E. Briney, editor of *The Rohmer Review;* E. T (Ned) Guymon, Jr., who assembled the finest collection of mystery fiction in the world (it is now at Occidental College); Howarc Haycraft, author of the foremost history of the genre, *Murder for Pleasure;* Allen J. Hubin, editor of *The Armchair Detective;* Francis M. Nevins, Jr., whose stories have appeared in this magazine; Otto Penzler, co-author of the *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection;* your editor, Ellery Queen; James Sandoe, winner of two MWA Edgar awards for criticism; Aaron Marc Stein, author of more than 80 mysteries; Hillary Waugh, creator of two popular series detectives, Fred Fellows and Frank Sessions; and Phyllis Whitney, President of the Mystery Writers of America.

Beginning shortly, the first of what will hopefully be monthly publications will appear. Each classic mystery story will be carefully annotated, with an introduction by a member of the editorial board or other authority, and will

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remain in print indefinitely. To keep prices low, books will not be available in bookstores, but only through a modified book-club plan. The design for every book in the monthly Mystery Library will be standard, each numbered on the spine, and the hope is that libraries and others will leave an open order for the entire series.

Never before has a university or other institution taken such a serious or ambitious approach to the publication of what has been too often regarded in academic circles as second-rate or trivial literature. At last, the most significant development of the fiction of the twentieth century will have the opportunity to achieve the respect it deserves.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

George Segal as the son of Sam Spade renews his family's link with an antique falcon statue, along the way keeping us up to date on his father's secretary Effie (Lee Patrick) and the nervous gunsel Wilmer (Elisha Cook, Jr.) in this spring's mildly amusing comedy, *The Black Bird* (Columbia Pictures), aptly demonstrating the continuing impact of Dashiell Hammett's 1930 book and, of course, Humphrey Bogart's stunning film projection of Spade.

Actually, Bogart's was the third screen version of *The Maltese Falcon.* As early as 1931 Warner's issued a fairly workable adaptation with Ricardo Cortez as Spade, then remade it in 1936 as *Satan Met a Lady,* with considerable alterations: the falcon statue a gem-studded horn, the corpulent Gutman transformed into a woman (the heavy, imperious Alison Skipworth), Spade played somewhat too slickly by Warren William and renamed Ted Shayne. The lady of the title was Bette Davis. Then, in 1941, young writer John Huston directed a close, vital dramatization of the novel, creating with outstanding cast, lean camera, and superb mood a landmark detective film, an unforgettable classic.

Hammettiana is quite current. There have been attempts—critically unsuccessful—to bring Nick and Nora Charles' charms to late-night television. The Continental Op is also being taliored for a TV series. *The Dain Curse* and *Red Harvest* will probably be feature films by next year.

Best of all, Joe Gores' superb *Hammett,* in which the tough, complex writer-detective is the hero of a novel set in corrupt 1928 San Francisco, has been bought for the movies by Francis

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Ford Coppola—whose affection for the city will undoubtedly be a plus for the film. And Gores, who will be doing at least the first draft of the screenplay, admires Coppola for having "a track record of actually *making films.*" Coppola will be sitting in on the preliminary sessions "and will probably direct if the script pleases him." No cast has been signed yet, but there is strong possibility Bruce Dern will play the title role—"he actually looks like the young Hammett." Naturally filming will be on location in San Francisco itself. "Every scene in the book takes place in a building that existed then and exists now . . . a good many of them filmable." The ginmills, Chinese sectors, alleys, and dark corners will come alive again in a portrait certainly worth the wait.

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INTERVIEW: H. R. F. KEATING

Twelve years ago, H. R. F. Keating created one of the most unusual, exotic, effective and affable detectives in fiction when Inspector Ganesh Ghote (pronounced Go-tay) of the Bombay CID made his debut in *The Perfect Murder.* Since then, there have been nine additional Ghote novels, with another due any day, as well as short stories about the naive, henpecked little policeman.

EQMM: Has Inspector Ghote changed much from his first appearance?

KEATING: I suppose what wasn't obvious at the start is his toughness and his shrewdness, which I do think actually fit into his character . . . although fundamentally he is someone who is always being sat upon by someone else. You have got to have, in a detective, a certain amount of toughness, so that he can beat the villain, as well as a sort of shrewdness, even slyness, by which he conquers apparent difficulties.

EQMM: When you first used Ghote in a book, did you know that he would become a series character?

KEATING: Absolutely not. He was intended as a one-shot. Then I went to interview Margery Allingham, and she said, "Do have a running hero if you can because financially it's a good idea." I was impressed by that. Then I wrote *The Perfect Murder,* which won the (British) Crime Writers Association prize, and it got a scroll from the Mystery Writers of America, so I thought, well, this should be it. Had I known it would turn into a series, I wouldn't have named him Ghote; I would have called him something easier to pronounce.

EQMM: Now when your publishers want a new book, they want one with Ghote because the series is a proven success. Does

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it disturb you that you are, in effect, forced to write about this single character?

KEATING: No, it doesn't, actually. I suppose this is because he is like me. I always feel a slight worry and say to myself, my God, how did I do that? Then you get nice reviews and you think, well, all right, if they say it's like that, then it *is* like that. But—how can I at least equal this, if not better it, the next time?

EQMM: And what about the next time?

KEATING: The most recent Ghote novel is set in the Bombay film world. They have this marvelous adjective in Hindi called "filmi," which means "like the film"—an imported English word adapted into Hindi—and the book is called *Filmi, Filmi, Inspector Ghote.*

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Whatever may be the weather outside your window when you read this, let's salute non-gentle spring. We can't do better than begin with a lively, stimulating historical survey of recorded sensationalism in all its forms, from the earliest times to the present day.

In support of it, friends, I give you one witty detective novel featuring Victorian Scotland Yard, one novel of darkest espionage, Britain *vs.* Russia, and one mystery thriller which indicates that even in the new Africa an American may not escape hocus-pocus as well as mayhem or murder.

The author of *Living in Fear,* "A History of Horrcr in the Mass Media," by Les Daniels (Scribners, $12.95) is a young scholar of immense reading, sound taste, and sympathetic insight, whose narrative glitters with entertainment.

From the eighteenth-century "Gothic" romance, always mystery either supernatural or down-to-earth, he traces horrific elements through novel, short story, and play. When we leave such Victorian giants as Dickens or Le Fanu for modern masters like M. R. James, he also traces the horrific in films, in magazines worthwhile or otherwise, even (believe it or not) in comic books.

Oldsters of my generation will remember the film *Frankenstein* and the film *Dracula,* to say nothing of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* But the charm is not only for oldsters; it's for everybody. Whatever your taste in sensationalism, this lavishly illustrated volume will captivate you to the end.

In Peter Lovesey's *A Case of Spirits* (Dodd, Mead, $5.95) we are whisked back through time to the gaslit England of 1885, when society's urge for contact

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with its dear departed profited so many spiritist mediums, real or fraudulent.

One controversial medium, young Peter Brand, we meet in company with stern, scientific Dr. Probert, whose collection of paintings glorifying nude ladies has been robbed of a choice Etty. There are seances for Dr. Probert, his wife, their daughter, the girl's *fiancé*, and assorted family friends. At a seance the medium is mysteriously slain by some force little known to Victorian life—or death.

Again we investigate with Sergeant Cribb and P. C. Thackeray from the original detective force at Great Scotland Yard. Beneath the eye of his unhelpful superior, Inspector Jowett, Cribb sifts the clues, discovers the method, and unmasks the culprit in this soundly plotted mystery whose humorous touch provides constant delight.

The blurb of *The Chameleon Course*, by Donald Seaman (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, $8.95), tells us that the English-seeming couple in their suburban retreat are actually Alexandrei Geria, defecting Soviet scientist, and the wife who has accompanied him from Russia.

Though Geria's skill is still needed in his own country, he suspects deadly reprisal against his wife, who has smuggled out the manuscript she could not publish there. In this fear he kills a burglar, and by British law must stand trial for manslaughter. Then, despite hostility from a grim old judge, counsel on both sides unite and win Geria's acquittal: grounds, self-defense.

The KGB hasn't finished. Slaughtering guards, its cutthroats carry away the defector. But don't worry. Those cutthroats get their deserts in a slam-bang finish at sea, and even Mrs. Geria can breathe freely at last.

In Thomas Klop's *Harmattan* (Bobbs-Merrill, $7.95), we accompany Nick Blane, American businessman, on his mission of rescue to independent Nigeria.

Nick's nephew, young Jim Austin, has gone there for the Peace Corps; and then, after some unnamed trouble, has vanished as though by magic. In a country still semi-barbaric, torn by tribal strife and seething with rumors of revolt, Nick Blane must find that nephew or at least learn his fate.

Everybody warns him off, including his own embassy. He can get help only from a mysterious lame beggar and, later, from the red-haired American wife of a Nigerian Army major.

Amid progress mingling with squalor, amid fanged dangers under the dry wind from the desert, Nick won't swerve or turn back. How he does find Jim Austin, how our most sympathetic characters make their escape through every explosion of violence, finally round out another brilliant story for your list.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

THE KILLING KIND, by Elliot West. Houghton Mifflin Company, $7.95

Elliot West is back and with him is Jim Blaney—a private investigator pushing 50, divorced, worldly wise, tough and still oddly vulnerable. As the story opens, two hoodlums lie at Blaney's feet—one dead and one vengeance-obsessed survivor. Blaney is plunged into instant celebrity which brings him and his two younger assistants by far the biggest and certainly the most unorthodox case they've ever had. The pileup is deadly and involves a string of murders committed by a killer with the stomach for anything—including the final kick in the gut.

THE APPLEBY FILE, by Michael Innes. Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc., $5.95

Here by a master of the short story is a collection of cases taken from the files of Sir John Appleby, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. These fifteen detective stories are a fine variety in setting and plot. Whether the case concerns a poltergeist, a *doppelganger,* or trout fishermen, and whether the mysterious death takes place in the sun, by water, or in cold blood, each of these adventures in crime baffles with ingenious twists and turns, delights with wit and excitement, and, as with any story or novel by Michael Innes, provides the most satisfying entertainment.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Black, Gavin	A BIG WIND FOR SUMMER	Harper & Row	$7.95	3/17
Butterworth, Michael	REMAINS TO BE SEEN	Doubleday	5.95	3/19
Curtiss, Ursula	THE BIRTHDAY GIFT	Dodd, Mead	5.95	3/76
Fraser, Anthea	HOME THROUGH THE DARK	Dodd, Mead	6.95	2/76
Maling, Arthur	RIPOFF	Harper & Row	7.95	3/24
Pauley, Barbara Anne	VOICES LONG HUSHED	Doubleday	5.95	3/12
Pearson, Peter	POSTSCRIPT FOR MALPAS	Dodd, Mead	5.95	2/76
Peters, Elizabeth	LEGEND IN GREEN VELVET	Dodd, Mead	7.95	3/76
Reno, Marie R.	FINAL PROOF	Harper & Row	7.95	3/3
Roberts, Willo Davis	EXPENDABLE	Doubleday	5.95	3/5
Wilheim, Kate	THE CLEWISTON TEST	Farrar, Strauss & Giroux	8.95	2/6

Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers

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EQMM BOOK DISCOUNT DEPARTMENT

The titles which we are offering this month are listed on the right han page. These books are regular publishers' editions, the very same a those available in bookstores. Only those books which appear can b ordered; we are not in a position to order other books so please do n include any others on the Order Form.

HOW TO ORDER:

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2. Out of stock titles will be shipped within 30 days.
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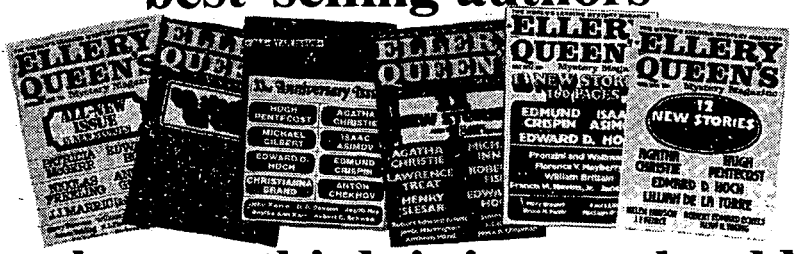

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DETECTIVERSE

SUPER-SNOOPER LITERARY MAYHEM

by M. R. GOLOMB

For every ill there's a cure that's effective,
And for every crime there is a detective.
With so many to choose from, just take your pick
And admire the prowess of your favorite dick.
If a case is tough, do not despair,
For Nero Wolfe, overflowing his chair,
Will push his lips both in and out
And solve each murder, resolve each doubt.
Mike Shayne, with cognac and iron jaw,
Will track down the breakers of the law,
While with Hercule Poirot there's no violent clash:
He works the gray cells and strokes his mustache.
Bertha Cool will flash diamonds and footballer legs
While Lam does the legwork and gets lammed by the yeggs.
If it's a *crime passionnel* with *accent français*,
All you need do is summon Maigret.
If the theater of the crime is allied to the stage,
Roderick Alleyn is the one to engage.
When the plot is murky and dense as molasses,
Send for Gideon Fell with his cape and his glasses.
If a court trial you relish, then you'd better hasten
Via Miss Della Street to catch Perry Mason.
Since each big-town slayer has his own counterpart
In each country village, even given headstart
Miss Marple will spot it, from banker to tart.
The challenging clues before the last chapta
Will frustrate and bug you. They hardly are apta
Make *you* a detective: they're just a smokescreen.
The solver? Of course he's Ellery Queen!
So hail to crime in its proper perspective
And that hero of parts, the fiction detective!

1976 by M. R. Golomb.

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a *NEW* Selena Mead novelet by

PATRICIA McGERR

It is nearly ten years since we've given you a new story about Patricia McGerr's Selena Mead, the undercover Q-agent. The most recent story was "Match Point in Berlin," which won First Prize in the special Mystery Writers of America contest sponsored by EQMM in 1967.

Selena Mead, now Mrs. Hugh Pierce, was (to quote her creator) "born a widow." The earliest published story about Selena, which appeared in "This Week Magazine" in October 1963, began with her first husband's murder. He was knifed by an enemy agent on a dark street in Washington, D.C. while on an assignment from the branch of security known as Section Q. Selena trapped the assassin, and in the succeeding stories became herself a link in the counterspy network.

"The Wall Street Journal" dubbed Selena "the female James Bond," but it is not an apt comparison. Unlike Bond, Selena's methods are always nonviolent—she prefers wit and wile to fist and gun.

In this newest novelet Selena again undertakes a secret mission—this time to Russia. Join her and become a 'tec tourist in Moscow and Leningrad . . .

HIDE-AND-SEEK — RUSSIAN STYLE

by PATRICIA McGERR

It was almost time to leave for the airport. Hugh stowed her suitcase in the trunk of the car, slammed down the lid. He was waiting on the sidewalk when Selena came out of the house. She closed the door, made sure the lock was engaged, and turned back to her husband. His artist's eye took in the belted black coat, soft leather boots, black handbag, black gloves. She was a study in quiet chic—from the neck down. But on her head, incongruously

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garish, was a stocking cap bordered with wide orange, green, and purple stripes.

"What—" His brows drew together in a scowl. "What's that on your head?"

"Moscow in January," she said demurely, "is very cold. This will keep my ears warm."

"And make you visible from a block away. That chewing gum you bought aroused my suspicions. The signal flag on your head confirms them. You're up to something, Selena. Why are you taking this trip?"

"I told you that two weeks ago." She moved past him, got in the car. He walked round to the driver's side and settled himself behind the wheel.

"Two weeks ago," he resumed, "you told me that a heart attack had forced an old school chum of yours to drop out of an alumni association tour and you'd decided to take her place. It had a false ring then and the longer I think about it, the more preposterous it gets." He started the engine, eased the car out of the parking space.

"Funny coincidence," she said. "That's exactly how I reasoned last month when you suddenly took off for the Middle East to paint the portrait of an Arab Prince. It lacked credibility."

"Of course it did. I was on a job for Section Q and the portrait commission was my cover story. So you were right not to believe me. Am I right too? Are you hiding a secret mission?"

"How could I be? The only Intelligence work I've ever done were assignments you gave me. And that stopped as soon as we were married. Do you think I got bored after eight years and found employment with some competing spy network?"

"I don't know what to think." He looked again at her gaudy headgear. "But I've a feeling you're involved in something and I'd like to know what it is."

"Maybe that's good," she retorted. "Now you'll understand how I feel when you go off to God-knows-where to do God-knows-what and I lie awake wondering if you'll ever come back."

"That's how it has to be. You know—wait a minute!" His voice sharpened in alarm. "This trip—whatever it's about—you're not walking into danger, are you?"

"Of course not."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"I'll make a bargain with you. I'll give you an honest answer if

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you give your word that in the future you'll always answer truthfully when I ask the same question."

"That's blackmail!"

"I call it a fair exchange. Oh, I know you think you're saving me worry by hiding the risks you run. The opposite is true. When I'm in the dark I imagine the worst. But if I can believe you when you say a job is routine, without physical danger, then I'll worry only when there's real cause. Agreed?"

"I'm beginning to suspect," he said, "that you planned the whole thing—including that crazy hat—just to make me trade off my right to lie to you."

"It's possible," she returned. "It's also possible that you've been a spymaster so long that you see agents behind every bush. If I choose to defy fashion when I'm thousands of miles from home, why should that upset you?"

"Why indeed?" He was silent while they crossed Key Bridge from Georgetown to the Virginia side of the Potomac. "You're right," he said at last. "When the shoe is on the other foot it rubs blisters. Okay, it's a deal."

"Then I'll tell you as much as I can without betraying a confidence. I'm going to Moscow to do an errand for a friend. It's a private family matter and doesn't involve any government agencies. The only danger is from one of those viruses that lie in wait for tourists. To put your mind at rest I promise not to drink the water."

"All right," he conceded, "it appears I'll have to be content with that."

"I'll be home in eight days," she assured him, "and tell you all about it."

The Moscow-bound 707 took off from Dulles Airport at eight p.m. It was a charter flight packed to the limit with the alumni of two colleges. Selena, buckled into an aisle seat, pulled the cap from her head and stared at the clashing colors.

That was careless, she thought, to put it on before I left home. Hugh's been in the business too long not to recognize an identification device when he sees one. But I couldn't pack it in my suitcase. I've no idea when contact will be made. It may happen at the airport. So I must wear the cap when I step off the plane.

I wish, though, I could have told Hugh the whole story. If only I hadn't let Trinka swear me to secrecy. But in view of the precari-

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ous state of her health what choice did I have?

Two weeks earlier the husband of a college classmate had phoned Selena to say that his wife was in the hospital recovering from a coronary and urgently wanted Selena to visit her. The request was puzzling but one she could not refuse. Driving that same afternoon to the hospital in a Washington suburb, she pieced together memories of the woman she was going to see.

Caterina Rodinova, class of '55. They had not been special friends in school, but she remembered well the shy girl whose Russian birth and illustrious ancestry had made her a campus celebrity. Something to do with her grandfather. A novelist? No, a poet. Yes, of course. It came back in a rush. Leonid Korodin, known as the Poet of the Revolution. His verses had been a rallying cry for Communists round the world. There was a square named after him in Moscow. And Trinka's mother had been his only child.

Trinka's mother escaped from Russia with the little girl a few days before the Nazis attacked. They spent the war years in England, then came to the United States. Trinka had married Robert Hudson soon after graduation and they'd moved to the West Coast where they'd lived until a few months ago when, as Robert explained briefly on the phone, his company transferred him to Washington. And now, after being out of touch for nearly twenty years, Trinka wanted to see Selena. Why?

She was no closer to an answer when she walked into the yellow-walled hospital room and stood beside the narrow bed. Long, softly waved flaxen hair spread over the pillow, framing a pale face whose delicate features were nearly eclipsed by a pair of enormous brown eyes.

"Selena?" The eyes were questioning, then the lips curved in a tremulous smile. "Yes, it is you. Oh, thank you! Thank you for coming."

"I was surprised when your husband called. I didn't know you'd moved back east."

"Yes." The woman in the bed shook her head, impatient with small talk. "I need help desperately and I didn't know where to turn. Then I remembered that you lived in Washington. In school you were always so resourceful, someone to trust and rely on. You will help me, won't you?"

"Of course." Selena moved a chair close to the bed and sat down. "I'll do whatever I can."

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"It's terribly important. But first you must promise that what I say will be just between the two of us. Even Robert doesn't know. I must be sure you will not give away my secret."

"You know I won't."

"Will you swear?"

"On my word of honor," Selena said solemnly. "But Trinka dear, you must not become so agitated. You'd better rest now. I'll come back tomorrow and we'll talk again."

"No!" She tried to raise herself from the pillow. "I can't rest until I know you'll help me."

"Very well." Selena held the other woman's hand in both of hers—the hand felt like a small bird that needed quieting. "Talk slowly, without excitement. You must not strain your heart."

"You're right." She lay back and was silent for almost a minute while her breath grew smooth and even. Then she smiled faintly. "I can be calm now, since you'll solve my problem. Did you know our alumni association is sponsoring a tour of Moscow and Leningrad?"

"I probably received a notice. Why? Did you sign on?"

"Yes, but it goes in the middle of January, so I have to cancel. The doctor says it will be many weeks before I can do anything strenuous."

"What a shame! Have you not been back in all these years?"

"No, my father was killed defending Leningrad and my mother was not in sympathy with the régime, which made a coldness between her and her father. So she never wanted to return."

"But you still have relatives there?"

"Only a great-aunt, the sister of my grandfather. He died three years ago."

"Yes, I remember reading the obituaries. He was a great poet."

"Very great." The words were emphatic. "I wish I had known him. But now he is dead and my great-aunt, with whom he lived in Moscow, is old and far from well. So I seized the chance to join the alumni tour. In a large group it is easier to be inconspicuous."

"There'll be other tours," Selena comforted. "Since Soviet-American relations have improved, it seems almost every organization is taking its members to Russia. As soon as you've recovered—"

"That may be too late. You must go now, in my place."

"To Russia?" She was startled. "Oh, Trinka, I don't see how—"

"It is for my grandfather. You know of him what the world

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knows. When he was young he wrote against the tyranny of the Czar and in favor of the people. His poetry inspired the men who made the Revolution. Afterwards he wrote many poems to celebrate the victory and the new world that was being made. Every schoolboy learned by heart the major works of Leonid Korodin. During his life he was greatly honored and when he died he was given a state funeral. The President of the Supreme Soviet gave the eulogy and the Party Chairman laid a wreath on the grave. Those are the public facts. What I tell you now you must keep secret until after you have returned. You understand?"

"Yes," Selena said. "I've given you my word."

"For some years before his death he was silent. There were new editions of his old work, but not one new poem. Well, he was old, perhaps his mind was failing. That's what everyone believed. Then, soon after we moved to Washington, there came to see me a man who had been my grandfather's close friend—or I should say his protégé, for Mikhail is much younger and also a poet, though not famous.

"He told me that my grandfather had, little by little, year after year, lost his illusions, begun to see in the new government many of the evils he had denounced in the old. He wrote poems of criticism that the Committee disapproved of and, when nothing he wrote could be published, he finally lost the will to write. Of course, none of this was made public. He was a hero of the Soviet and the authorities did not wish to label him a dissident.

"So he remained in seclusion and few people learned of his changed opinions. Even Mikhail was not allowed to see him—he thought it was because he himself held unorthodox views. But before Mikhail got out of the country he visited my great-aunt. She showed him a poem my grandfather wrote before his final illness. All the others, the ones the Committee rejected, had been destroyed, but this one he wrote in secret. It is a kind of last testament, and Mikhail said it is his greatest work. His sister has kept it hidden, but she fears that when she dies—which may be soon—it will be lost forever."

"And that's why you planned to go to Moscow," Selena concluded. "To save your grandfather's poem. Is it so important?"

"A work of art," Trinka answered, "is always important. And truth is more important still. But for me there is a stronger personal reason. I have two sons. I want them to be proud of their great-grandfather, to honor his memory. Now they know only

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what my mother, in her bitterness, taught them—that he helped to overthrow one oppressor to put a worse one in its place. Publication of his last poem will show them, show all the world, that he was, in the end as in the beginning, a defender of freedom. You will get it for me, Selena? You are my only hope."

The large eyes were fixed on Selena's in anguished entreaty. Selena hesitated only an instant before saying, "Yes, Trinka. I will bring back your grandfather's poem."

She phoned the travel agency at once and was told she was in luck. The Soviet tour was fully booked, but there had been a single cancellation, due to illness. Since time was so short, she could bring her check to the office and fill out the necessary forms. When she had done so, the agency head examined her visa application and nodded approval.

"It all seems in order," he said. "We'll have to press a bit to get it through in time, but we'll manage. Maybe you'll do us a favor in return."

"A favor?"

"Nothing big." He smiled genially. "This group will make up seven busloads and we need one person on each bus to act as leader. Will you be responsible for bus Number One?"

"Oh, I don't think—"

"It's no work," he assured her. "You merely check the list of names each day to make sure nobody is left behind. Since you're traveling alone, it will help you get acquainted. Then that's settled." He was out of his chair, ushering her to the door before she could demur further. "Thank you for coming in, Mrs. Pierce. I'm sure you'll enjoy the trip."

She saw Trinka again on the day before departure. Home from the hospital, though still in bed, she looked much better.

"I told Mikhail you were taking my place," she explained. "But he doesn't think you should go to see my great-aunt. For me, as a member of the family, it would have been natural. But if a strange American visits her, the powers will become suspicious."

"Then I can't get the poem? In that case there's no point in my going."

"Yes, you must go. Mikhail has made arrangements. The writers and artists who are out of favor have an underground organization. The poem speaks for all of them and they are determined that it reach the outside world. Many will work together to put it into your hands. Mikhail told me to give you this."

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From the drawer of her bedside table she pulled out the orange, green, and purple cap. "You must wear it at all times and they will know you are my friend. And you must take with you many packs of chewing gum."

"Chewing gum?"

"It is not made in the Soviet Union. So always, Mikhail says, wherever American tourists go, there are youngsters asking for it. The one who recognizes your cap will come close and say 'gum chew' instead of 'chewing gum.' You will give him a package and he will give you a pin or medal. They are not beggars, these boys—they exchange some small souvenir for the gum, though, of course, the gum can be sold for a much higher price.

"In each tour city the daily schedule is posted in the hotel, so they will know where to look for you, but other information—like your room number—you should write on the gum wrapper. And their instructions will come to you with the pin. It sounds complicated, I know, but Mikhail said his friends must always be on guard against spies. Can you handle it, Selena?"

"I'll do my best," she promised. "Don't worry. Next week I'll bring you your grandfather's poem."

The Washington-to-Moscow flight, with a stopover at Shannon to change crews, took nearly twelve hours. With clocks turned forward eight hours, it was mid-afternoon when Selena's plane landed. Buses carried the tourists to the mail airport building where they lined up to walk past solemn young men in uniform who stared hard at each passenger's face while checking passports and visa photos. They filled out forms listing currency and valuables and then, having claimed their luggage, carried it through customs.

The formalities over, Selena stood near the door with one hand in her coat pocket clutching a package of chewing gum. From now on, she thought, I must be constantly alert, ready to make contact. She stiffened as a high-booted young woman in a fox fur hat came close and spoke her name.

"You are Mrs. Pierce, yes?"

"Yes." The hand that held the gum relaxed. That was not the password.

"I am your Intourist representative." Her English was precise, only slightly accented. "You are leader of bus Number One, yes?"

"Yes, I am."

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"Here is the list." She gave Selena a paper with two columns of typed names. "You can all go to your buses. Please check the names and do not let the driver leave until everyone is aboard. Also please collect from each person his passport to have ready when you arrive at the hotel."

It was the first hint that the job of bus leader was not the sinecure the American agent had made it seem. Selena accepted the list and promised to follow orders. The buses, seven of them, were lined up outside the door. Each had in its left front window a two-foot square card on which was printed in bright blue letters: INTOURIST-MOSCOW—and the name of the travel agency. Beneath the printing, the bus numbers—from 1 to 7—had been added in heavy crayon.

Soon, with 28 passengers and a plump rosy-cheeked guide named Olga, bus Number 1 left the airport for the 35-kilometer ride to the center of the city where it deposited them at the huge modern Hotel Rossia. There Selena turned over the passports to the Intourist representative and waited with the others for their luggage and room assignments.

It was six o'clock when she was at last alone in her room where the single bed with its linen-encased blanket was almost irresistibly inviting. Flying into the sun had cut short the night and telescoped mealtimes, so there had been a surfeit of food and little sleep. She would gladly have skipped supper to take a long hot bath and sleep the clock round. But she could not depart from the formal program. Only by following it exactly could she be sure to be in place when Trinka's allies came to seek her.

So she left her coat in the room but still wore the stocking cap when she descended to the below-lobby restaurant where her group was scheduled to eat all its Moscow meals. Ready in her handbag was a package of chewing gum with her room number on the wrapper. But no one accosted her on the way to the dining room and the meal proved uneventful. Before returning to her room she stopped to copy the tour schedule which was posted at the restaurant entrance:

FRIDAY

8:30 Breakfast
9:30 Kremlin Museum and Armory
1:00 Lunch

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2:30 Qs & As
5:30 Dinner
6:15 Bolshoi Ballet

SATURDAY

9:00 Breakfast
10:00 City Tour
1:00 Lunch
2:00 National Fair & Space Museum
5:30 Dinner
6:15 Siberian Folk Dance

SUNDAY

9:00 Breakfast
10:00 Troika Rides
1:30 Lunch
2:30 Subway Tour
9:30 Lv for Railway Station
10:40 Train to Leningrad

"What's that mean?" A fellow tourist, also studying the poster, pointed to the fourth item under Friday.

"Questions and answers, I imagine," Selena said.

"Well, of course I figured that out," the woman said irritably. "But what does it mean? You're our bus leader. Aren't you supposed to know these things?"

"It's a propaganda session." A tall man from another bus came to her rescue. "They bring in experts in various fields. We ask the questions and they give the party-line answers."

"Sounds dull. I think I'll go shopping instead." The woman looked again at Selena. "Don't hold the bus for me."

She moved away and the man gave Selena a companionable wink. "It begins to appear," he said, "that leading a bus isn't all prestige and perquisites, the way they made it sound back in Washington."

"You're a bus leader too?"

"Number Four. Bill Parsons." He offered his hand. She shook it and gave her own name. "When the going gets rough, maybe we can swap miseries over a vodka."

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In her own room again she studied the schedule, trying to guess where and when contact would be made. Soon, she hoped. Once the poet's papers were passed over and packed safely away, she could begin to enjoy the sights like an ordinary tourist. Except for her responsibilities as bus leader.

She smiled, remembering the exchange at the dining-room door. Qs and As. "Questions and Answers." Like the chicken-egg enigma, she'd never known—perhaps no one did—which came first? Did Section Q get its name from the fact that its agents established identity with sentences beginning with the letter Q? Or did the name of the section give rise to the device? If I were on an agency assignment instead of a private errand, that conversation would have been loaded with significance. And the woman would be my contact. She put the schedule away and got ready for bed.

How do our Russian-speaking agents meet, she wondered drowsily. The Cyrillic alphabet has no letter Q. But it had been a long day—two days, in fact, with Wednesday running unseparated into Thursday—and sleep put an effective end to her curiosity.

The first onslaught of chewing-gum seekers came the next morning as they waited in the icy wind outside the Kremlin Museum. About a dozen neatly dressed boys paced the line and many of the Americans exchanged packages for square pins decorated with pictures of the Kremlin tower, the Soviet flag, and other emblems. None of them singled out Selena or spoke the magic phrase, "gum chew."

Another group met them when they left the Museum, and a third pounced as they entered a church. By the time the bus returned to the hotel the tourists had begun to be selective about the souvenirs for which they would trade the coveted merchandise. But the orange, green, and purple headcovering remained unremarked except by their guide, who called it a useful beacon to help straying Number 1 bus riders find their way back to the fold.

During the lunch-break Selena was given 28 ballet tickets to distribute. Keeping one for herself, she added the theater-seat location to the hotel-room number on the chewing-gum wrapper. But, though many teenagers asked for gum outside the Hall of Friendship where the question-and-answer session was held, none said "gum chew" and the marked package stayed in her pocket.

That night the Bolshoi troupe danced *Giselle* and Selena almost

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forgot her anxiety in the beauty of the performance. Trinka didn't say contact would be made the first day, she reminded herself. It could happen tomorrow. Or even on Sunday. The transfer of a few sheets of paper would take only an instant. There was no reason to assume that delay meant something had gone wrong.

It was about 10:30 when the ballet ended. They reclaimed their coats and came out of the theater to see a large segment of the audience moving rapidly on foot in one direction. When they asked their bus driver for an explanation, he tapped his watch, summoned his small store of English to say, "On the hour. The tomb of Lenin."

"The changing of the guard?" Selena asked.

"Yes," he said. "Guard change."

"The hotel's just across Red Square," someone said. "We can walk from here."

So bus Number 1 returned to the hotel half empty. Selena joined the hardier travelers to follow the swarm who, like lemmings, were moving toward Lenin's tomb.

A crowd of several hundred, mostly Russians, were standing in the Square. They waited with almost breathless anticipation, their eyes fixed on the two soldiers who stood motionless guarding the tomb. Then the clock began to strike and an officer, leading two other soldiers, marched smartly past the crowd. Like Arlington, Selena thought with an odd sense of recognition. It's almost the same ceremony as at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Then, when she had stopped expecting it, a voice close to her ear said softly, "Gum chew." She almost jumped, almost exclaimed. The words were so out of keeping with the moment's solemnity. But her control held and she made no sound, did not even look round to see the speaker. Instead, moving slowly, she put her hand in her pocket, drew out the gum, and held it in half-open palm behind her back.

A hand took it from her, then slid a folded paper inside her glove. That's not how it was planned, she thought. And he's a man, not a boy.

She waited impatiently for the ceremony to end so that she could get back to the hotel. Some of her group went on to the bar for a warm-up drink, but she declined the invitation and hurried instead to her room to pull the slip of paper from her glove. It had written on it in block letters a single word: QUIT.

She stared at it, unbelieving. That was not a message from the

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friends of Trinka's grandfather. The word, with its revealing initial letter, could have had only one source. It was an order from Section Q. An order, more specifically, from her husband. But how—why?

Her mind was aswirl with questions. How did Hugh learn about her mission, about the "gum-chew" code? And why had he sent an emissary to warn her off? That Section Q had operatives in Moscow did not surprise her. But surely they had more important things to do than meddle in minor domestic matters. Yet one of them must have trailed her from the theater to Red Square and there traded his note for her gum. You sent a man to do a boy's work, Hugh, she mentally accused him. Why?

There was only one way to get an answer. She looked at her watch as she started toward the phone. Midnight in Moscow was four p.m. in Washington. He was probably in his studio and—her lips curved in a wry smile—probably expecting her call.

It would take, the operator told her, about half an hour to complete the call. Waiting, Selena sorted out her thoughts. She must accept the possibility of a listener on the line but that would present no real problem. Hugh would know why she was calling and they were both skilled at conveying information in veiled terms. So when the connection was made they hurried through the conventional remarks expected of a tourist calling home and she waited for him to answer the questions she didn't ask.

"I visited your sick friend," he said. "We had an interesting talk."

"Really? I hope it didn't overtire her."

"Not at all. I think she was glad to see me. But you'd better stay clear of her. Her disease may be contagious and dangerous."

"You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. I've gotten an expert diagnosis. You'll be sorry to hear, too, about your cousin. She was caught smuggling drugs into Turkey and is likely to get ten years in jail. There's not a thing the family can do to help her."

"How dreadful!"

"She should have had better sense. Well, that's enough bad news. I miss you, darling. Please take care of yourself and hurry home."

She rang off and made translation. The sick friend was, of course, Trinka. I might have guessed his suspicions would lead him to the classmate I replaced on the tour. And when he told

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Trinka he was worried about me, she felt obliged to set his mind at rest by telling him all the facts—about the poem, the chewing gum, everything.

And the talk about my non-existent cousin in Turkey was meant to scare me off. He was saying that if I'm caught and put in a Russian prison, no one at home can get me out. But that's nonsense. I'm not smuggling drugs or valuables or military secrets. All I plan to carry out are a few sheets of paper that the authorities don't even know exist.

Hugh is being overprotective, that's all. He's so determined to keep me away from the kind of fire he plays with daily that he doesn't even want me to do a small favor for a friend. It's sweet of him to be solicitous, but this time he's frightened by shadows. I wonder, though, what he meant by "an expert diagnosis"?

On Sunday morning bus leaders were given two items to distribute—tickets for the folk dance and car-and-compartment numbers for the train. Selena took out a fresh pack of gum and wrote her new locations on the wrapper. The morning was, from her point of view, uneventful. But that afternoon, on the way into the huge barnlike building that houses the Soviet Space Exhibit, a chewing-gum squad approached. One of the boys zeroed in on Selena with the query, "Gum chew? You trade?"

He held out a pin bearing a likeness of Lenin. She accepted it and gave him the marked package.

"You shouldn't encourage them," the woman beside her said disapprovingly. "The ban on gum is the only good thing about Communism. My dentist says—"

Selena listened absently to the lecture as she dropped the souvenir into her purse. There was a small piece of paper on the back of the pin, but she would have to wait until she was alone to read it. Did it set time and place for a rendezvous, explain how the poem was to be handed over? Trying to guess what the message said blinded her eyes to the rocket display, deafened her ears to the glories of the Soyuz program.

When the space tour ended, she hurried to board the bus ahead of the others and, taking out the pin, slid the note free. It read: *Be patient. There are difficulties.* Be patient! She crumpled the paper. I could find better advice in a fortune cookie. Don't they realize tomorrow is my last day in Moscow?

For nearly 24 hours nothing happened. She concluded that the

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difficulties, whatever they were, had proved insurmountable. She must return home empty-handed. The final event was a tour of the Moscow Metro. En route to the entrance Olga, the Intourist representative, emphasized the problem of remaining together and insisted that all write down the name of the square where their bus would be parked. If any of them became separated, they should return to that square and wait for the others. Thus prepared, they went underground.

On the platform, interrupted by the noise of arriving and departing trains, Olga described the workings of the system, provided statistics, and explained the symbolism of the art on walls and ceiling. Then they were ready to ride. Since they could not all crowd into one car, they spread out along the platform with instructions to ride to the second stop, get off there, then regroup. A train stopped, the doors opened, people poured out, and others, including Selena's group, raced aboard. A stranger, following closely, nearly knocked her down.

"Quiet," he whispered. "Get off at the next stop."

He moved swiftly away from her to the other end of the car. While most of her companions found seats, she stayed near the door. Section Q again. Another message from Hugh.

The train hurtled through a tunnel, emerged again into light, and the doors opened. Selena let herself be swept onto the platform. Several people tried to call her back, but she pretended not to hear until the doors began to close. Then she looked through the windows at her fellow tourists and pantomimed dismay.

The Q-man, having left the car by the farthest door, walked past her to the escalator. She followed him up and out of the station. On the sidewalk, a few paces from the exit, he slowed down and she fell into step beside him.

"Our mutual friend," he began without introduction, "thinks he failed to make his point on the phone. He's afraid you may be going ahead with a high-risk enterprise."

"I understood what he was trying to tell me."

"Understood?" he challenged. "Or accepted?"

"It doesn't matter, since the enterprise appears to be canceled." She quoted yesterday's pinned message, adding, "In a few hours I'll be leaving town, so you can tell our friend to stop worrying."

"Mmm. Maybe. But he wants me to put you in the picture, so you'll know the threat is real. I gather this mission of yours is freelance, not for Section Q. Right?"

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"That's right."

"As soon as our friend found out what you were doing, he asked me to sniff out the facts."

"An expert diagnosis?" she murmured.

"You could call it that. Here's what I found. Your classmate was naive to think she could hide inside a tour group. When her name turned up on the visa list, it triggered questions about why, after so many years, she was returning to her native land. The query was bucked to the KGB and a couple of agents visited the great-aunt.

"Communist bureaucracies move just as slowly as democratic ones, so by the time they got to her the plan had been changed. Somebody from the literary group had already picked up the poem in order to pass it on to you. The agents put pressure on the aunt to make her talk and she told them everything she knew—including the fact that the poem is pure dynamite. The invasion of Czechoslovakia touched off Korodin's outrage and it all poured out—the suppression of freedom, the silencing of artists, the enslavement of the people.

"It's a rather long narrative that starts with 1918 and, verse after verse, traces the betrayal of the Revolution. Taken alone, the words wouldn't do much harm, but in the handwriting of Communism's great prophet—well, you can see why they'd go to any length to stop the original manuscript from being taken out of the country."

"Do they know who has it now?"

"No, all the old lady knew was that a messenger came for it and said it would be delivered to the poet's granddaughter in America. You can be sure your tour was under surveillance from the moment the plane landed."

"There are one hundred and seventy-six of us," she pointed out, "in seven buses. Even the KGB can't watch all of us all the time."

"True. That's why I took a chance on cutting you out from the herd on the subway. I'm glad you don't have the poem, but you may still receive it before you leave Moscow. If you do, destroy it. Tear up the pages, burn the scraps, and dispose of the ashes in a way that can't be traced back to you."

"I can't do that. If the poem is all you say it is, it must be saved."

"It can't be saved. As you say, they can't watch all of you every minute. But there's one place where everybody can be thoroughly

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searched. That's at the Leningrad airport before you take off for the United States. If you're carrying the document, it will be found. You'll be arrested and they can convict you of stealing a priceless Korodin manuscript without revealing its contents. There's no power in Washington that can set you free, not even the President. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very."

"And you'll destroy the poem?"

"I'll probably never see it," she evaded. "Time is running out."

"A lot can happen in six hours. In six minutes even. I'll make a deal with you. My instructions are to get you safely out of the country and avoid an international incident. Section Q isn't concerned with the poem. Until three days ago no one on our side had even heard of it. But it's valuable propaganda and I hate to see it go down the drain."

"Then I shouldn't burn it?"

"Not right away. You'll receive it before you leave Moscow or not at all. There's no way they can get it to Leningrad. So I'll wait tonight at the railway station. In the dark and confusion I'll be able to get close to you. If you have the poem, give it to me. I'll keep it safe until the hunt dies down. Then we'll figure a way to get it to the poet's granddaughter. How does that sound?"

"Fine. Your facilities are certainly better than mine."

"And you'll give me the poem this evening?"

"I will," she agreed, "if I get it."

They separated and she took a taxi back to the parked bus. When the others emerged from the Metro there was much merriment over the leader's being the one who got lost and Selena expressed embarrassment at having thought they were to leave the train at the first stop instead of the second.

After returning to the hotel some tourists used the few remaining hours to buy gifts in the hotel's "hard currency" shop and others wrote and mailed postcards. For Selena it was simply a time of waiting, with each minute that passed bringing her closer to failure of her mission.

At last, when dinner was over, they boarded the bus for the station. Their luggage, unloaded from another bus, lay on the platform and the confusion the Q-man had forecast was compounded as they milled about, each traveler obliged to identify his own suitcase and either carry it to his assigned compartment or find a porter to do it for him.

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A man bumped against Selena, muttered, "Quickly," and held out his hand.

"Nothing," she responded and he faded away. She found her car and compartment and carried her own bag aboard.

The compartments, composed of two upper and lower berths with a narrow aisle between them, were already made up for the night. In the one with Selena's number, three people from her bus were sitting on the lower berths—a husband, wife, and 14-year-old boy. They looked with dismay at Selena and her suitcase.

"There's no space." The wife spread her hands helplessly. "My husband put his bag and mine under the beds, but there's no room for Buddy's." She patted the one that lay beside her. "And now one more!"

Selena, standing in the doorway as other people carrying luggage brushed past her, agreed with the assessment. While the husband poked futilely beneath the bunks as if he might magically make more room, a porter tapped Selena's arm.

"*Spassibo*," he said. "I help."

She stepped aside. He sidled into the room and hoisted her bag into an open area above the door.

"Hey," Buddy said, "there's a big luggage section up there. We didn't even see it."

The Russian took the boy's bag from the bunk and shoved it in next to Selena's.

"Thanks a lot." The husband pulled a handful of kopeks from his pocket.

"*Nyet*." The man waved the coins away, edged past Selena, and hurried down the corridor.

It was a long and uncomfortable night. The only way four people could occupy such cramped quarters was to go to bed at once. Selena slept fitfully, burdened with thoughts of the failure of her mission. The difficulties had evidently proved insoluble. She must return to Trinka without the poem.

The train pulled into Leningrad at seven a.m. Buddy brought down his own bag, then reached for Selena's.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "There's something else up here. Some paper." He held an envelope toward Selena. "Is that yours?"

"What—oh, yes, it is mine." She took it from him and stuffed it in her handbag. "I almost forgot I put it up there. Thank you."

The next quarter hour was chaos as passengers and luggage debarked from the train and the tourists were once more shepherded

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to seven waiting buses. The envelope was like a burning brand in her handbag all the way to the hotel. Another message from Section Q? No, that connection was broken on the station platform. The number of her compartment was known, of course, to Russian underground. One of them, posing as a porter, had delivered the envelope when he lifted up her suitcase. So it must be the poem. They had, after all, found a way to get it to Leningrad.

The most beautiful city in the Soviet Union, that's what they call Leningrad—formerly St. Petersburg, home of the Czars, capital of old Russia, a treasurehouse of art and architecture. But for Selena, moving from one historic scene to another, the vision was blurred by internal debate.

As soon as she reached her hotel room she had opened the envelope and found four sheets of paper covered with closely written Russian script—the last Korodin poem. Four sticks, to follow the Q-man's metaphor, of pure dynamite. In the Hermitage she looked at Rembrandts and Goyas and Renoirs and thought, It's only four pieces of paper. There must be a way to hide them long enough to get them past customs.

In the summer palace at Pushkin she listened to the account of how artisans had recreated, down to the most intricate detail, silk screen destroyed in the war and thought, If I had their skill I'd be able to camouflage the poem and carry it away. What she needed was lab equipment that could photograph the pages, reduce them to microdots, copy them in invisible ink. But she was out of touch with Section Q. Their interest in her had ended in Moscow.

She considered phoning Hugh again to ask for help. But his order had been given—destroy the poem. And it was unlikely she could persuade him to a different view, or even explain the problem, on a line that was sure to be monitored. The decision was hers alone to make—to burn the pages and drop the ashes in the river Neva or risk her own freedom by trying to smuggle them out.

Her most vivid recollection of Leningrad was the Tuesday-afternoon tour of the St. Peter and Paul Fortress. In Czarist times it had been a prison, and after they had crowded into a bare cell the guide clanged shut the door and turned out the light. It was a moment of theatrics designed to dramatize the sufferings of the early revolutionaries, but for Selena it seemed a foretaste of her future.

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That evening, as she dressed for the opera, she was aware that the articles in her suitcase had been taken out and repacked in slightly different order. Her room had been searched. Was everyone on the tour given the same attention? Or had they drawn the accurate conclusion that the person whose name was added to the visa list after the poet's granddaughter dropped out was the most likely suspect?

They'd found nothing, of course, since she carried the poem at all times in a zippered compartment of her handbag. But that would do no good at the airport where her handbag and even her person could be, and probably would be, searched.

I can't do it, Trinka, she mentally addressed her friend. I'd try, I'd take the risk if there was even a slim chance of getting through. You thought that no one else knew about the poem, that bringing it back would be easy. But now, with the authorities on the alert, I'd be bucking hopeless odds. To sacrifice myself in an effort sure to fail would be the worst kind of folly.

But even as her mind formed the argument, she saw again Trinka's ashen face and trustful eyes, heard her plead her sons' right to take pride in their ancestry. I can't let that go up in smoke. There must be a way. I've got to find it.

Wednesday was the last full day of the tour and as the time of decision narrowed she grew more desperate. In the afternoon they visited a museum where native arts and crafts were on display and she stood before a case containing a gaily painted wooden doll. It was large and bulb-shaped, and inside the doll, according to the guide, there were twelve other dolls, successively smaller in size, one within the other. It was typically Russian and souvenir shops were filled with small-scale replicas.

I'll buy one of those, Selena thought, fold the manuscript tightly, and put it inside the middle doll. Since they're bound to find it anyway, I might as well make it easy by choosing the most obvious hiding place.

That night they celebrated the trip's end with a gala dinner at the Sadok Restaurant. The tables were laden with vodka and champagne. A six-piece orchestra accompanied two singers and an acrobatic dancer. Toasts were effusive and spirits high. As a memento of the occasion the leader of each bus was presented with the window card bearing the bus's identifying number.

"Now you can show everyone that we were Number One," Buddy said while the large white cardboard was passed round the

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table for autographs. She caught the envious note in the boy's voice and started to say, "Perhaps you'd like—" when an idea struck her. Instead of offering him the sign as she'd intended, she finished lamely, "to be a bus leader yourself some day."

The most obvious hiding place. The concept triggered by the Russian doll summoned memory of Edgar Allan Poe's tale of the purloined letter which had been successfully hidden by leaving it in plain sight. Perhaps, just perhaps, she had the answer.

It was after eleven when the party ended. Selena pushed through the throng waiting at the coat-check counter to reach the side of Bill Parsons, leader of bus No. 4. The sign tucked under his arm was, she noted, auspiciously free of autographs.

"Hello, fellow sufferer," he hailed her. "I guess neither of us will let ourselves be conned into this job again. Rounding up stray sheep, getting blamed when they don't like their theater seats, making sure everybody gets back the right passport. It's a real headache."

"At least we've been rewarded." She waved her sign.

"Some reward! Believe me, I don't need any reminders."

"Aren't you going to take yours home?"

"Carry that back to the States? You've got to be kidding."

"In that case—" She moved closer, dropped her voice. "I have two nephews who have their bedroom walls covered with strange signs."

"Sure, I did the same thing when I was a kid. *Keep Off the Grass, Beware of the Dog*—that sort of thing. One saying INTOURIST—LENINGRAD should be a real collector's item."

"That's the problem," she said. "If I give it to one and not the other—"

"There'll be jealousy." He nodded, understanding. "But it's no problem. Take mine and make both boys happy."

"Well, if you're sure—"

"It will save the chambermaid from carrying it out with the trash tomorrow."

"That's very kind of you." She accepted the second sign. "I'm really grateful."

That night she slept peacefully for the first time since leaving Washington. Her plan was made. It might succeed, it might fail. But the time for vacillation was over.

After breakfast she used her nail scissors to loosen the lining of the top of her suitcase and pulled it free till half of the paper-

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backed cloth hung limp. Then she carried it to the counter near the elevators where a lady was in attendance day and night to hand out keys, serve tea, and solve minor problems. She spoke little English, but Selena's problem was clearly visible, her need for an adhesive substance apparent. The lady nodded and smiled assurance that the need would soon be filled.

Selena took the suitcase back to her room and began to copy the signatures and good wishes that the other riders had penned on the back of the bus Number 1 sign on the blank surface of the sign from bus Number 4. She was just finishing when a knock on the door signaled the arrival of a chambermaid with a tube of glue. Accepting it with thanks, Selena shut the door and placed a chair in front of it to guard against surprise interruption.

Then she took from the envelope the four pages of the Korodin poem. Placing the Number 1 sign face down on her dressing table, she separated the pages into two pairs and laid them side by side on the back of the card. They fitted easily, with a wide margin all around. Applying glue to that margin, she then put the other bus sign, with the number 4 inside, on top of the flattened pages, evened the edges, and pressed them firmly together. The result was, to all appearances, a single sign—that for bus Number 1—covered front and back with autographs. Only close inspection would reveal its double thickness.

That done, she used the glue to repair the damage she'd done to her suitcase. Then she made another trip to the service counter to return the tube. She finished her packing well in advance of the eleven a.m. deadline and went down to the lobby with suitcase and sign. Soon the buses, now minus number cards in the windows, began loading and they were on their way to the airport. And if the KGB is half as efficient as people think, she told herself, they know by now that the tourist in Room 451 ripped the lining off her suitcase and glued it back again. Let them deduce from that a belief that they've pinpointed the location of the missing document.

At the airport she held her sign with its secret pocket conspicuously in front of her and was glad to see that most of the other bus leaders were also carrying theirs. Those who still had rubles were directed to the exchange window, while the rest were channeled to customs officials who inspected luggage and packages, women's handbags, men's wallets, even clothing pockets. The search was slow and painstaking but the Intourist representative

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shrugged off questions and complaints, professing ignorance of the cause.

"They must have been tipped off that one of us is trying to smuggle out Russian currency," someone suggested. The rumor circulated swiftly and gained wide acceptance since it accounted for the thoroughness of the search. A few people who had planned, in spite of the taboo, to take home one or two rubles as contraband souvenirs, flushed guiltily and scurried back to the exchange window.

When Selena's turn came she laid the Number 1 bus sign on a bench, took off her coat, and gave it with her handbag to the customs man. She stood stoically while her body was patted by a woman official with head cocked and narrowed eyes—listening, Selena knew, for the telltale crackle of paper. Then she put her coat back on, slung her purse over her arm, and picked up the sign. She was starting to move on when the woman said sharply, "Wait!"

Oh, no! Selena froze, felt the blood pounding in her temples. This is it. I've been caught. Maybe the woman official is an Edgar Allan Poe fan. Selena turned slowly back, forcing an expression of polite inquiry.

"The hat." The woman pointed to her head. Trying not to show relief, Selena pulled off the knitted cap and gave it to the man to inspect while the woman ruffled her hair. In a few seconds she was dismissed. She put the cap back on, again picked up her sign, and went on to passport control. The man in the booth glanced without interest at the sign, then fixed his eyes unblinkingly first on her face, then on the pictures in passport and visa. Finding them to be likenesses, he tore off two-thirds of the visa and returned the remnant with her passport.

On the other side of the barrier the tension drained away. She sank exhausted onto a bench to await the call to board the plane. Around her people chattered angrily about the delay and promised that their first act on arriving home would be a call to the White House, the State Department, or their congressman. Selena hardly heard them. Her entire attention was focused on the journey's end.

When the boarding announcement came she was among the first out the door. And when they neared the huge Pan American jet she had to hold herself back from breaking into a run. But a few paces from the plane her exhilaration faded. Two soldiers

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stood at the foot of the steps checking everyone who boarded. One more hurdle.

She steeled herself and moved slowly forward. But those men, like the one in the booth, were interested only in faces. One took the final portion of her visa sheet, made sure of her identity, and let her pass.

Her seat was again on the aisle beside an elderly couple who were grumbling about the airport search.

"Such a mess," the woman said, "having everything opened and pawed through. I'll be very surprised if all the suitcases get on the plane."

"You don't have to come to Russia to lose your baggage." Her husband was more philosophical. "It's part of the flying experience."

At least, Selena mused, I can be the first one through U.S. customs since I'm certain my suitcase won't be put on board. After they tear out the lining and take it all apart, will they put it back together and send it on a later plane? Or is it lost forever?

She didn't really care. The suitcase and its contents were expendable. The valuable cargo was now on her lap. Soon they were airborne and when, a little later, the captain announced that they had just flown out of Soviet air space, Selena joined in the applause, then rested her hands lightly on the twinned cards. After I deliver the poem to Trinka, she decided, I'll look up young Buddy and give him the sign for bus Number 1.

"Q"

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